Venezuela
Steve Ellner

COMMONWEAL

A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture

February 11, 2000

Alice McDermott
On Faith & Fiction

Catholic Seminarians

Robert Imbelli
Dolores Leckey
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To the Editors

Romero & the pope

Father John Jay Hughes, who, the editors underline, is a "church historian," charges me with a lack of candor in treating Pope John Paul II's response to the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in my book *Witness to Hope* [*see* Correspondence, November 19, 1999].

May I direct historian Hughes's attention to the discussion of these issues on pages 451-452 of the book, with special reference to endnote 38 on pages 906-907? There, I explore Archbishop Romero's role in the murderously tangled situation in El Salvador in the late 1970s, drawing on, among other sources, Teresa Whitfield's *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuria and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador*, a lengthy interview with the Roman postulator of Romero's beatification cause, and some documentation from the Congregation for the Causes of Saints which I imagine Hughes has not had the opportunity to examine.

That Pope John Paul II's reaction to the assassination of Archbishop Romero was "very muted" (as Hughes puts it) is a myth. Historians, as I understand the term in its contemporary usage, ought not to propagate myths.

GEORGE WEIGEL
Washington, D.C.

Keep it light!

Paul Baumann's "Crossing the Threshhold" [December 3, 1999] on George Weigel's biography of the pope was a howl. Lord, I wish *Commonweal* printed more like it. The incisive humor of the piece allowed Baumann to tell the truth: Many church historians and theologians do not care about good writing, and it hurts their work. Certainly, a writer can be difficult to read because his thought is elaborate and his language reflects an underlying complexity, as was the case with Rahner. But too many half-page sentences in theology tomes use complication to mask tangled thinking. Some of the best theologians of our time—Küng, Schillebeeckx, Gutiérrez—are easier to read than many of their lesser counterparts. Until more understand that graceful sentences can be instruments of grace, American Catholic theologians and church historians will continue to have little impact in the pews.

LAURA PANGALLOZZI
Maplewood, N.J.

Correction ■ The author of "Lord, When Did I Smell You?" in the January 14, 2000 issue is Valerie Schultz. We regret misspelling her name. THE EDITORS

Romero on repentance

Re: Richard McBrien's "A Repenting Church" [November 19, 1999]: Archbishop Oscar Romero did not hesitate to admit sin and error on the part of the church. For one example, in a homily preached on December 31, 1978, he spoke of "certain economic interests, which the church, lamentably, served," that this was "a sin of the church, deceiving and not telling the truth when it should have." Again, on the next New Year's Eve, he said: "The church is holy because it has God's spirit giving it life; but it is sinful and it needs conversion, because we make it up—humans tending toward evil and at times perhaps with a past that shames us."

ROBERT J. MILLER, O.P.
River Forest, Ill.

Where do you stand?

Dennis O'Brien ["Gay Marriage?" January 14, 2000] writes that the Vermont Supreme Court decision that affirmed identical civil benefits for same-sex couples that are currently afforded married couples was "a model of judicial prudence worthy of national attention." He says this while acknowledging that the "common benefits" provision of the Vermont Constitution, upon which the ruling was based, says absolutely nothing about marriage or sexuality. He then concludes that "domestic partnership" is a better vehicle than marriage to award these benefits to gays.

O'Brien's position that domestic partnership is the better vehicle is, however, nothing more than his preference. Nothing in what he said would stand in the way of logically concluding that gay marriage was the best alternative. Having stripped his argument of any principled defense of marriage—as it has been understood by all the world religions from time immemorial—O'Brien now wants to stop short of aligning himself with advocates for gay marriage. Why he doesn't have the courage to finish the job remains unexplained.

WILLIAM A. DONOHUE
New York, N.Y.

The writer is president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

The author replies:

I have written at length in *Commonweal* rejecting "gay marriage." I quote the last paragraph of my article of January 28, 1994: "Heterosexual marriage *as a cultural institution* (not necessarily in its obvious historical flaws and failures) has a special, larger-than-life meaning that cannot be captured even by loving, stable homosexual couples. Heterosexual marriage connects the couple to humanity's longest saga, connects to the family from which every homosexual emerges but to which he does not finally return, connects back to the ultimate fecundity of nature...heterosexuality expresses a wonderment, a tension in difference, that eludes or transcends the simple gaiety of sex."

Having opted for heterosexual *marriage*, I see no reason not to grant cer-

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COMMONWEAL

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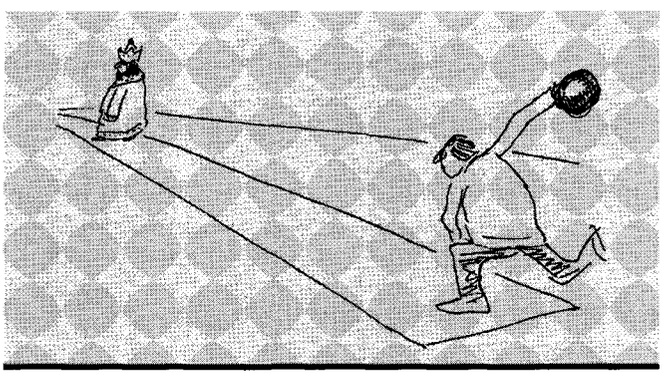

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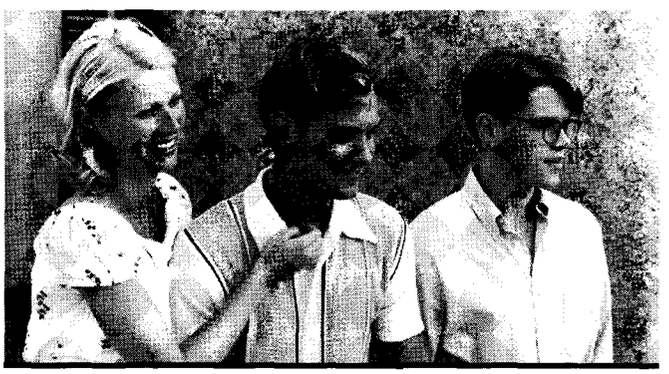

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tain civil rights and recognition to various sorts of domestic partnerships and households. In France, a variety of domestic partnerships are recognized by civil law including the domestic partnership of a priest and his housekeeper. Presumably they would not want that to be labeled a "marriage."

DENNIS O'BRIEN

Hobson's choice?

I rush—metaphorically speaking—to the defense of, indeed, the restoration of "Hobson's choice" [Editorial, January 14, 2000]. I mean, of course, the idiom itself. In the evil days that have fallen upon us, when even our language has come under heavy assault, when even the most innocent and useful expression may be subjected to abuse and degradation, we cannot stand idly by and not come to the defense of a very useful idiom. For "Hobson's choice" does not mean a choice between Scylla and Charybdis, nor for the lesser of two evils, nor—as your editorial seems to imply—between Hillary Clinton and Rudolph Giuliani. A note about the idiom's genesis, its original and still useful meaning, may help to restore this much battered expression to its former high status.

In the days of John Milton, Thomas Hobson was a coach driver between Cambridge and a London inn. He also kept what is generally believed to be the first livery stable in England. His clients, mainly undergraduates, came to realize Hobson would insist that they would accept the mount nearest the door, which they came to label Hobson's choice. It meant, for them, no choice.

Therefore, if there is any choice for the person who would like to make a choice it is not Hobson's choice. I mentioned Milton with intention, for on the death of Thomas Hobson in 1631, Milton wrote a sonnet usually titled "On the University Carrier."

JAMES FINN
New York, N.Y.

From the editors: Correction noted. What choice do we have?

From the trenches

Andrew Greeley's observations regarding why Catholics still marry Catholics ["Just the Facts, Man," December 17, 1999] affirm what I have experienced over the past dozen years of ministry (five of those as pastor of a Newman Center parish): Well over half the young couples whose marriage I witness are Catholic/Catholic. More surprising is the increasing number of Catholic/non-Catholic couples who express some interest in participating in RCIA when one wishes to become Catholic and/or the other party wishes to complete his/her sacraments of initiation. I have also found that, even though college-age, marrying Catholics do have reservations about certain church teachings and practices, they still consider themselves Catholic and will choose to marry in the church as long as they are treated with common respect. I can also report that many of them have become active worshiping members of the parish!

(REV.) PERRY KAVOOKJIAN
Fresno, Calif.

Not welcome

I read with interest Andrew Greeley's article on Catholics marrying Catholics. I am a young thirty-something practicing Catholic engaged to be married to a young thirty-something lapsed Catholic. We have not started the process yet because I am in the middle of an annulment. Greeley's point regarding clergy not making younger Catholics feel welcome is, in my experience, right on the money. I tried to start the annulment process at my previous parish; my calls were never returned and my approaches to the monsignor strangely rebuffed. I gave this man a year and then left for warmer climates. My new parish has been most helpful and I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

My new priest once asked why I keep returning to the church. I can only respond that this is my faith. And believe me, for every young person like me who does persevere, there are several like my fiancé who don't come back, except for maybe Christmas or Easter. And the church is lucky they do that.

JULIA SOTO FRAZER
West Hollywood, Calif.

What about divorce?

In "Just the Facts, Man," Andrew Greeley uses data from the National Opinion Research Center's "General Social Survey" (GSS). One of the problems with GSS is that it does not include information on the religion of previous spouses. The 1998 GSS indicates that one in four of every married respondents with a Catholic upbringing ages twenty-five to forty-four are currently divorced or separated. For Catholics forty-five to sixty-four, the rate is even higher—almost one in three. Research by Professor Gary Becker at the University of Chicago indicates that divorce rates are higher for those who intermarry. If that is the case, intermarriage rates for married Catholics do not give the whole picture.

For this reason, in my book (*The Catholic Family*) I estimated intermarriage rates with another data set—the "National Survey of Families and Households" (NSFH). It provides information on the religion of previous spouses and whether the respondent

(Continued on page 37)

On-line discussion group

■ *Commonweal* will be sponsoring an e-mail discussion group from February 15 until July 1, 2000. The group will exchange messages dealing with articles and topics presented in the magazine. To join, simply send an e-mail message to *commonweal-subscribe@egroups.com*

Happy e-mailing!

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Peacemaker

Will Nelson Mandela ever stop astounding and humbling the world by the force of his moral vision and the transformative authority of his personal courage and conviction? Not soon, we hope.

Fresh from the peaceful transfer of power he presided over upon his retirement as president of South Africa last year, in January Mandela plunged into the even more intractable political turmoil that has gripped Central Africa for the better part of a decade. The genocide that momentarily propelled Rwanda onto the front pages and TV news in 1994 is well known, if not well understood by those outside of Africa (*see*, "Never Again? The Church & Genocide in Rwanda," *Commonweal*, November 5, 1999). Rwanda's neighbor, Burundi, long wracked by violent conflict, now seems similarly poised on the precipice of some unimaginable horror. Mandela hopes to avert that possible outcome while negotiating an end to the civil war that has devastated Burundi's economy and terrorized its 6 million people. It would appear to be a near impossible task—but then, Mandela has pulled off miracles in the past.

As in Rwanda, the fighting in Burundi pits the ethnic minority Tutsi against the majority Hutu. In Burundi, however, the power relationship is reversed, and it is the civilian Hutu population that is most threatened. Since taking power by force in 1993, the Tutsi-led government and army have been fighting various Hutu insurgencies. The conflict has already claimed 200,000 lives and flooded neighboring countries with tens of thousands of refugees. Recently, the Tutsi government, accusing the general population of giving aid and protection to the rebels, has forced 350,000 Hutu into squalid, disease-infested camps. Humanitarian groups as well as the United States and other governments have strongly protested this action, fearing that such forced relocation could be the preamble to genocide.

As the crisis intensified, Mandela inserted himself into the peace negotiations among Burundi's numerous warring factions. He did not mince words in addressing government officials and representatives of the rebel forces assembled in Tanzania. Nor did he excuse Africans from full culpability for the horrors convulsing the region. "Please join the modern world," he scolded the representatives of the political groups. "Why are you lagging behind? Why do you allow yourselves to be regarded as leaders without talent, leaders without a vision?"

As in Rwanda, unarmed civilians, including women and children, are the most common victims of the fighting. Mandela tried to appeal to the combatants' sense of honor in the face of such senseless killing: "When they [the outside world] hear this they say, 'Africans are still barbarians—no human beings could do what they are doing.'"

Whether or not Mandela's intervention will bring about a negotiated settlement to the conflict is of course impossible to tell. "You have reached a stage where none of you is completely right and none is completely wrong," he said, urging the parties to compromise. But to what extent either side will be willing to disarm, or the Tutsi government be willing to share power, is far from certain.

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Many of the Hutu rebel fighters have become mere bandits and are no longer under the control of any political authority. Mandela is not naive about the difficulties. His apparent strategy is to promote an African-mediated cease fire while looking to the international community for humanitarian aid and constructive diplomatic and economic pressure. He plans to return to the peace table in Tanzania this month, bringing with him the weight of a galvanized and concerted international community, including possibly President Bill Clinton.

Obviously these are hopeful signs. In the meantime, the potential for mass slaughter remains a daily worry. Lessons drawn from Rwanda tell us that the genocide was not the result of any spontaneous uprising or longstanding and intractable ethnic hatreds. The genocide was planned and carefully promoted by the Hutu government for months in advance. In retrospect, signs of the impending calamity are easily recognized.

This suggests that ways can be found to avert the worst of such killings. First, observers on the ground should be able to keep track of the government's more malign initiatives and thus alert the world. Second, it is now widely believed that early, forceful action by the UN, or the international community acting through some other venue, could have forestalled the Rwanda genocide. The UN has frankly admitted its manifold failures in this regard. What was missing at the time, of course, was the political will to act, and the United States was among the most derelict, as President Clinton himself has admitted. Building a public consensus for such intervention—even to stop genocide—is not easy, and neither elected officials nor humanitarian agencies have done nearly enough to convince the public of the moral imperative justifying such action. But if the tragic lessons of Rwanda and Bosnia continue to be learned, and if Mandela's leadership and enormous prestige can be put to good use, history need not repeat itself in Burundi.

ET CETERA

'Charity fraud alert' ■ A friend reports receiving a promotional letter that has given her a whole new outlook on promotional letters. It's accompanied by a questionnaire bearing the same title as this piece. The letter is from Richard E. Ralston, managing director of the Ayn Rand Institute. Ralston wishes to warn Americans against a gigantic fraud, a "hoax perpetrated by the media, charities, politicians, and academics." You'll know you're a victim if anybody has ever tried to "get your money by making you feel guilty about the plight of others," or if you've been "forced to pay taxes to fund government welfare programs." The hoax is based on "the phony idea that you have a moral duty to serve others." This is "a bold-faced lie." In reality, "you don't owe your life to anyone." "Real morality means pursuing your own happiness and interests." And yet, "[I]f these guilt-mongers get their way, everything America stands for—independence, self-reliance, self-confidence—will go up in smoke." For, "[o]nce they've established a 'moral obligation' to help others, they'll have made it 'moral' for government to take everything you own for 'the good of society.' That's a one-way ticket to tyranny." It's time to "stand up and fight back for our liberty."

The Institute bases its philosophy, called Objectivism, on the principles laid down in the works of the late novelist Ayn Rand, author of *Anthem*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged*. To reach the "eager young minds" in the nation's colleges and high schools, the Institute runs yearly contests in which students write essays based on the novels, thereby grasping Rand's view of "man": "A heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." Once imbued with Objectivism, the students will eventually "put that philosophy into action as they take control of our country's institutions of government and the private sector." The takeover will presumably include biblical studies; the Sermon on the Mount may be replaced by Ayn Rand insights that will surprise you, such as: "The world is perishing from an orgy of self-sacrificing."

Since the battle for sanity and capitalism must be funded, recipients of the letter are asked to send the Institute a tax-deductible contribution of from $20 to $1,000, or "other___." Our friend is sending the "___." She, too, wishes to prevent charity frauds.

NOTEBOOK

OUR MAN IN WESTPORT

Finding Michael Williams's grave

Nothing in our lives is preordained, yet in looking back at the decisions one makes and the surprising places those decisions take you, the guiding hand of something more than rational choice and circumstance seems at work. I grew up in Westport, Connecticut, which is now notorious for being a pretentious suburb—the average house sells for something like $800,000—but was a middle-class community forty years ago. My family moved there in 1956 into a small three-bedroom split-level (my father paid $19,000 for it) in one of the town's new developments. Westport has always had something of a literary and artistic reputation. F. Scott Fitzgerald briefly lived there, and the geography of *The Great Gatsby*, with its expansive views of Long Island Sound, is said to be modeled on Westport. Peter DeVries, the novelist and *New Yorker* writer, set a number of his stories in barely disguised versions of the town. Paul Newman and his wife Joanne Woodward are long-time residents. You get the picture.

My parents hadn't the slightest interest in, or even much knowledge of, Westport's literary heritage. The schools were good, my father's commute to New York tolerable, and the taxes low. As I grew up, my academic and literary interests

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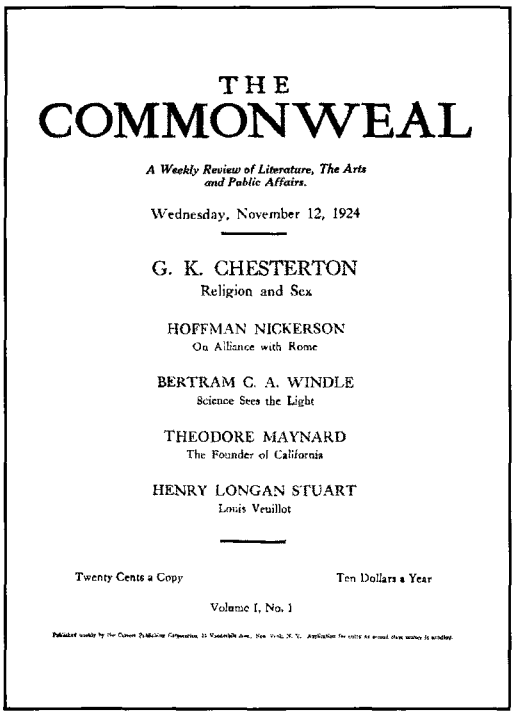
were not much more pronounced than theirs; I spent most of my time on the soccer field. Like a lot of adolescent boys, I did develop a devotion to Hemingway, and for several years I relied disastrously on *A Moveable Feast* and *A Farewell to Arms* as practical guides to writing and romance. In that context, I seem to remember Lillian Ross in her famous *New Yorker* profile quoting some derogatory remark Hemingway made about Westport. I couldn't agree more, and, when my parents moved out of town while I was in college, my ties to the place gradually attenuated. I had no interest in returning to the suburbs and I certainly never expected to have any connection to Westport's literary, let alone Catholic, heritage. But, as it turns out, I do.



THE
COMMONWEAL

A Weekly Review of Literature, The Arts and Public Affairs.

Wednesday, November 12, 1924

G. K. CHESTERTON
Religion and Sex

HOFFMAN NICKERSON
On Alliance with Rome

BERTRAM C. A. WINDLE
Science Sees the Light

THEODORE MAYNARD
The Founder of California

HENRY LONGAN STUART
Louis Veuillot

Twenty Cents a Copy — Ten Dollars a Year

Volume I, No. 1

As fate would have it, my wife, three kids, and I recently moved to a town adjacent to (but less expensive than!) Westport. I was not terribly keen to return to the general precincts of my youth, but few options presented themselves if I was to continue working in New York. My return to the suburbs took place as *Commonweal* celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary, which for various reasons caused me to reread Rodger Van Allen's history of the magazine, *Commonweal and American Catholicism*. There I discovered, much to my amazement, that Michael Williams, *Commonweal*'s founding editor and the man largely responsible for getting the enterprise off the ground in 1924, had lived and died in Westport. I do not attach any occult meaning to such coincidences, but it did please me to learn of this aboriginal connection between what appears to be my life's work and the place where I grew up. Williams's funeral Mass must have been celebrated in the church where I received my First Holy Communion and confirmation. How odd.

Van Allen tells us that Williams died in Westport on October 12, 1950. I assumed he had been buried in town, and decided to make a little pilgrimage in search of his grave. A brief call to the church rectory got me directions to the "old" cemetery.

It was a gray, drizzly Sunday afternoon when I turned onto the ill-kept dirt road that is all that separates the Episcopal and Catholic burial grounds. The cemeteries are situated on a hill to the north and west of town and in the midst of a dense residential area. I parked the car just off the rutted dirt road. I had no idea where to begin looking or even if Williams was buried there. Most of the graves closest to the main road were from the late nineteenth century. There were a number of obelisks and large ornamental monuments as well as two mausoleums dating from the mid-1930s. Canvassing the names, I noticed that ethnic allegiances remained strong even in death, with the Irish and Italians (joined by a few stray Poles) buried in separate areas. At the far southeastern corner of the cemetery, which abutted a thickly wooded hillside, there was an efflorescence of figurative statuary. A smooth-featured Virgin Mary, Joseph holding the baby Jesus, even the entire Holy Family were perched broodingly on various gravestones, creating a little crowd of witnesses. Knowing something of Williams's tastes, I headed for those romantic evocations of the afterlife.

There, at the cemetery's edge, the names on the modest monuments were Venezia, Antedomenico, Adidomenica, Feledre, Delano, and Marushak, and the burial dates were from the beginning and middle of the last century. I started walking up and down the irregular rows of graves. Three rows in, I found what I was looking for. I could hardly believe it—after all, this whole adventure was something of a lark. But there it was, a rather elegant granite monument no more than four feet high, with a rough-hewn top and the only decoration a simple floral design engraved in two small triangles in the top corners of the front of the stone. The simple inscription read, "Michael Williams" and, below that, "1894-1950." Patches of green moss covered the monument's plinth and the stone's base. There was no mention of Williams's family or *Commonweal*.

Again, I thought how odd it was that Williams lay buried, here, just off a road I had traveled countless times as a child and teen-ager. My elementary school was a half-mile away, and in fourth grade I had had a crush on a girl who lived just down the street from the cemetery. I remembered going to her birthday party as well as her name, which was Olivia.

Williams's direct association with *Commonweal* ended sadly in the late 1930s when his uncritical enthusiasm for Franco resulted in his resignation as editor. According to Van Allen, Williams combined a dedication and inspired devotion to the magazine with a taste for hobnobbing with wealthy Catholics. A former newspaper reporter, he was a heavy drinker, and battled illness for several years before he died.

I drove out of the cemetery and back home to my new suburban life pondering the virtual anonymity of the man whose dream of creating a "Catholic literary journal" has generously given me work for the past ten years. Strange, I thought, how clues to one's destiny, a destiny I for so long thought required traveling far from where I had grown up, had been lying unnoticed all around me in my childhood. It seemed a peculiarly Graham Greene-ish, if not Catholic, moment.

PAUL BAUMANN

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DANIEL CALLAHAN

IT'S THE CULTURE, STUPID

Why we don't have universal health care

For many of us in health care, nothing is so frustrating and baffling as the failure of this country to enact some kind of universal health-care plan. While Bill Bradley and Al Gore have made different proposals and the Republican contenders talk about the problem a bit, none of them has offered a bold plan. Their proposals are all incrementalist, aiming to improve access to health care but not, once and for all, guaranteeing basic care to all regardless of ability to pay.

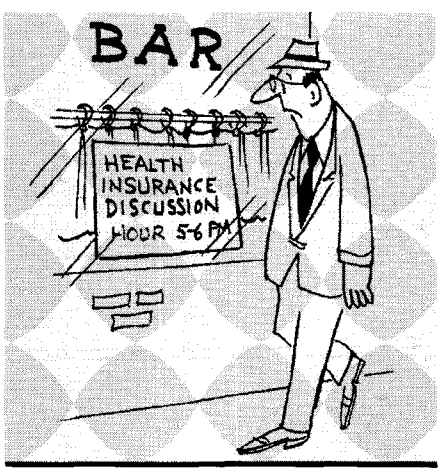
What makes matters worse is that there are now 43 million uninsured, a number that is growing by 1.7 million a year. Employer-based insurance plans—the main way most Americans get their health care—declined from 69.2 percent in 1987 to 64.2 percent in 1997, with no end in sight. The longer trends of this kind go on—particularly when combined with a steady increase in annual health-care costs (now double the rate of general inflation)—the more costly it will prove to introduce any strong government program.

The failure of earlier efforts, such as Clinton's 1994 proposal, can be traced to bad politics, bad thinking, and bad public relations. The Clinton team bungled by its closed-door method of drawing up the plan, by its inability to overcome the public's aversion to government-run programs, and by its failure to gain backing from the business community, which was worried about the imposition of a higher burden. Its greatest failure, however, was its inability to find a way to persuade 85 percent of the population, reasonably well insured, to accept some risk in their coverage to help ensure coverage for the other 15 percent. No one figured out how to make that case, which seemed to require a wholesale change in the entire system for the benefit of a minority. Clearly, the language of a "right" to health care, or the wide-scale publicity about the suffering of those without insurance, did not then—and does not now—have the power to move us away from the present crazy and inequitable system.

Yet even after reviewing all the more obvious reasons why the United States—alone among all the developed countries of the world—does not have universal health care, there is still a lingering mystery. We have no trouble understanding the need for universal education, fire and police protection, and for national defense. For every other developed country, it is obvious that health care belongs among them. For us, it is not clear at all.

Why not? You don't have to look far. There are many subtle, and not-so-subtle, features of our culture that make it hard for us to change. From my travels in Europe, let me note some of them. All turn on the importance given the public sector in other countries, and its failure to be taken with sufficient seriousness here.

Consider the strength of public transportation systems in Europe, the easy availability of public toilets (and the willingness of restaurants to allow nonpatrons use of their rest rooms when there are no handy public facilities), and the willingness of people to share their tables in crowded restaurants. The core European notion of solidarity as the ethical foundation for the provision of health care, rather than an appeal to rights, is quite apparent when those practices are observed.



But even more subtle and telling are two other common European practices: greater tolerance of smoking in public places, and a greater willingness to allow pets on subways, trams, and in restaurants. These practices are almost always forbidden in the United States. What they show me is an even more serious form of solidarity: a willingness to put up with the sometimes unpleasant, undesirable behavior of others. Our supposed pluralism never goes that far, and our American individualism and self-righteousness about health behavior do not create good soil in which to grow universal health-care coverage. Nor is there anything on the cultural horizon to indicate that any serious change is in the offing.

For years, going back to the Truman administration, pundits and policy analysts have predicted that this country would eventually be forced to provide universal health care. Common sense and an appeal to simple justice seemed to point inexorably in that direction; and now, to back that up, there is a huge federal budget surplus, as well as considerable backing from the medical community, for decades a powerful opponent of what it liked to call "socialized medicine." Even so, we are going nowhere. Culture and inertia seem far harder to overcome than anyone suspected.

If there is one hope, it is that the middle class, now well covered, will begin hurting, forced to pay more out of pocket and increasingly insecure about job-provided coverage. At that point, it is said, the stage may be set for one more push. I say that also, but I would not place a very large bet that it will happen. Why? Because a radical change will then be required, of just the kind that has traditionally fared poorly in this country. We are incrementalists, but in this case the incrementalism is moving in the wrong direction. □

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William Pfaff

THE FUTURE

U.S. hegemony will be challenged

In talking about the future, it is necessary to understand that change ordinarily is very slow, but cumulative change is very fast, and rupture in the continuity of history is always possible.

The responsible thing that one can say today about the models for society and political organization in the new millennium is that initially they will be the same models with which we ended the last millennium. But sooner than one may think, the international system will have changed in fundamental ways.

The United States is and will remain the most powerful and influential state and social system in the early years of the new millennium. It remains the "sole superpower." The market capitalist system dominant during the past two decades, given its present form by the United States, its "globalization" sponsored by the United States, will continue as the most visible and important economic and commercial model. However, the American position and the prevailing system will both be challenged. The nature and identity of a successful challenge are unforeseeable today, but it is in the nature of a dominant or hegemonic system to generate challenges and its own eventual replacement.

This is a basic political reality. Domination can endure for long periods when it is that of an advanced civilization over backward ones (as with Rome). The challenge to the American position will come from societies who are themselves equally advanced.

Look back a century. In 1900 the British Empire was "the sole superpower." It had rivals in Europe, as the United States today has one rival in the European Union, another in Russia, and still others in Asia. But the conventional belief a century ago was that which Norman Angell was to express in a globally best-selling book in 1910, *The Great Illusion*, which held that the common interests of the great powers, and above all their economies, were so closely interlinked and interdependent that war no longer made sense. The existence of empires and the gold standard made the world's economies and international finance more "globalized" than they are today.

The destructive forces which were to dominate most of the twentieth century were without influence in 1900, or did not yet exist. Marxism as a political movement was a marginal affair. Lenin was thirty years old, concluding a period of political internment in Siberia, and about to go into exile. Hitler was eleven years old. Benito Mussolini was seventeen, a budding pacifist and socialist. Fascism and Nazism did not exist. They were unimagined, perhaps unimaginable.

The British, French, Portuguese, and Dutch empires dominated Asia and Africa. The United States was in the process of putting together its own empire from the Spanish possessions it had just seized in the Caribbean and the Far East. The Hapsburg system was troubled by nationalism in the Balkans, and the Ottoman Empire was in decline, but all that seemed manageable.

China was weak, dormant. Japan was alert, and in 1899 had just put a final end to the extraterritorial privileges enjoyed by European traders in Japan. It was about to make an explosive entrance into world affairs by destroying the Russian army at Port Arthur in 1904, and sinking the entire Russian fleet in a single day—completely unexpected exploits.

But I have surely made my point. The century began in circumstances of apparent security more reassuring than those of today. No one in 1900 could have imagined the events that only fourteen years later were to destroy the existing international system and deal a blow to Western civilization. The effects are still felt. They opened the way to the immense and totally original totalitarian political phenomenon which, following the Russian Revolution in 1917 and Hitler's coming to power in 1933, dominated world affairs for most of the rest of the century.

Responsible political and economic scholars in 1900 would undoubtedly have described the twentieth-century prospect as continuing imperial rivalries within a Europe-dominated world, lasting paternalistic tutelage by Europeans of their Asian and African colonies, solid constitutional government in Western Europe, steadily growing prosperity, increasing scientific knowledge turned to human benefit, etc. All would have been wrong.

In the 1960s and 1970s, "futurism" was in vogue and briefly became an academic undertaking in the United States. While it tried to produce imaginative "alternative futures," it was fundamentally an exercise in responsible projection of what seemed the dominant trends of the time. Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote in the 1960s that the United States and the U.S.S.R. were "converging" toward what he called "the technotronic age," a new kind of technological "superculture" dominated by "organization-oriented, application-minded intellectuals."

Herman Kahn and Anthony Weiner wrote a book in the 1960s called *The Year 2000*. They took for granted an unchanging international system and continuing cold war. Their cultural forecasts (a dominant global trend toward "sensate" culture, secularization, Westernization, the marginalization of religion) were mere generalizations of the experience of the American sixties.

Daniel Bell forty years ago said ideology was finished. Francis Fukuyama said ten years ago that history was over. The well-known Cambridge social anthropologist Ernest Gellner identified nationalism with the "social chasms connected with early industrialism" and predicted that it would become muted and "less virulent" as time passed. When Anthony Lake was policy advisor to President Bill Clinton, Lake said that America's obligation was to struggle against nationalism "and all those who would return newly free

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states to the intolerant ways of the past."

He, like Gellner, took for granted that nationalism is a primitive phenomenon which progress will eventually remedy. Yet the ideology survives and thrives today; the United States, Britain—and Russia—are among the most chauvinistic societies on earth, and history marches on.

Thus far I have been looking back, not ahead, but I have been doing so in order to insist upon how little we really can see when we look ahead. The Anglo-Austrian philosopher Karl Popper remarked many years ago that "for strictly logical reasons it is impossible for us to predict the future course of history." This follows from the fact that knowledge grows at an immensely rapid pace, and "we cannot anticipate today what we shall know only tomorrow." We can project statistical series and established material trends, and generalize from perceived present realities. It is useful to do this, but not that useful.

The conventional wisdom of the decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall has said that Europe and the United States would grow closer, the former Communist states would become integrated into the democratic community, globalization would advance the economic and technological Westernization and modernization of the developing nations, a further internationalization of society would see more "humanitarian" interventions and greater limitation on national sovereignty—and that only "rogues" would resist all this. Those already seem excessively optimistic assumptions.

As the new century begins, we see that globalization, as a doctrine or ideology of radical trade deregulation, has probably peaked in influence. The Seattle WTO conference ended in confusion; the American Congress denies the president fast-track negotiating authority. The radical deregulation model is questioned in Asia and has always met skepticism in the continental European Western industrial countries. There is accumulating European-U.S. tension on important issues of technological, economic, and political sovereignty. The belief that Russia will soon be incorporated into Western economic and political systems is no longer tenable. Those statements contain implicit forecasts. They describe realities or observable trends expected to influence the next decade. They presume continuity or, in the case of globalism, project into the future a recent important discontinuity in the current of opinion and events.

"Let's humor him and do as he asks."

They suggest an outcome a decade hence which would be markedly different from that contained in the optimistic forecasts, but which would still be easily recognizable. Cumulative change would have altered our perceptions and expectations, but there would have been no rupture in history.

However, ruptures occur. A traumatic transformation in world history occurred between 1914 and 1918. Another rupture was provoked by the Russian Revolution, and by Mussolini's march on Rome followed by Hitler's accession to power. Another by the Crash of 1929. Sun Yat-sen's alliance with the Chinese Communist party and Soviet Russia in 1924 was a rupture in Asia's modern history, as were Japan's occupation of Manchuria and departure from the League of Nations. This is to speak only of the first half of the twentieth century.

The simple and straightforward expectation of the future is for more of the same. Or if not that, for more or less of a repetition of something well-known from the recent past (another stock-market crash, another depression, another Hitler, another Munich). Neither assumption is really useful; however, both are inevitable because without them it is hard to talk at all about the future, even though the sole certainty about the future is that it is, strictly speaking, unforeseeable.

The useful statements that can be made are the general ones: that hegemonic power invites opposition; that a vacuum of power will be filled; that political entities seek to aggrandize their power and wealth; that evil exists in history and reason is not its master.

The American historian Charles Beard once said that a lifetime's reflection on history had taught him four things: "When darkness comes, the stars begin to shine; the bees that rob the flowers provide the honey; whom God wishes to destroy he first makes mad; the mills of God grind slowly but they grind exceeding small." Such gnomic utterances are no use to policymakers. They nonetheless contain all we can really know about what the new millennium will bring. □

William Pfaff *was an editor at* Commonweal *from 1949 to 1955. His* Barbarian Sentiments: How the American Century Ends, *was a National Book Award finalist in 1989. It will be reissued this year with an afterword about how the century did end, and on what follows now.*

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Steve Ellner

CHÁVEZ'S REVOLUTION

Report from Venezuela

Politics in Venezuela, which is usually waged with great passion, was all but forgotten in the weeks after December 15, 1999. On that day, 71 percent of the voters ratified the new constitution devised by the followers of President Hugo Chávez to "refound" the republic. Then, just hours after the last votes were cast, torrential rains along the nation's entire coastal area produced one of the most destructive catastrophes in twentieth-century Latin America, leaving an estimated 30,000 dead and 300,000 homeless.

The convergence of elections of paramount importance, the calamity of the century, and the end of the millennium led some Venezuelans to attribute it all to divine wrath, and to hold President Chávez personally responsible. In fact, the catastrophe served to underline a theme raised by Chávez in February 1992, when he led a failed military coup, and again in 1998 when he successfully campaigned for president: Venezuela's only hope lies in ending the old way of doing politics, in which individual interests, party patronage, and rampant corruption block the effort needed to pull the nation out of underdevelopment.

The challenge of national recovery thrust on Venezuelans by the events of December 15 dovetails with another theme addressed by Chávez: the pressing need to evacuate the inhabitants of hundreds of slums on the hillsides of Caracas and the coast. In Caracas's central Libertador municipality, 237,000 people live in precarious dwellings. Chávez's proposal, one of Marshall Plan proportions, would relocate these people to safer ground while connecting the Orinoco and Apure rivers with the Amazonian system, thus promoting Latin American integration.

To achieve ambitious national goals like this, Chávez has assigned the Venezuelan armed forces a special role, tapping into their perceived discipline and public prestige. The military's image contrasts sharply with the nearly absolute disrepute with which the country's traditional political parties are currently held. At several rallies for the constitutional referendum, Chávez called out "at ease" to soldiers in military formation and then dispersed them into the crowd, illustrating his slogan of a "civilian-military alliance." Chávez has appointed officers to top positions in both his party and the government, and has entrusted the military with the administration of a massive public works program known as the "Plan Bolívar-2000."

By the early weeks of January, politics was back to normal and Chávez's hardline adversaries were pointing to the new constitution as a sure road to military dictatorship. Opposition politicians decry the strengthening of the national executive at the expense of the Congress, and express special concern over the lengthening of the presidential term from five to six years as well as the significant and novel change of permitting immediate reelection. In its 1999 annual report, Freedom House concluded that Venezuela under Chávez had established itself as a "role model for future demagogues."

The danger of slippage for Venezuela's forty-year democracy is undeniable. The new constitution weakens the legislative branch in favor of the national executive. In addition, while military efficiency may be a welcome change when it comes to public administration, the long-term implications are disquieting. Even Chávez's civilian supporters expressed displeasure off the record in January when the president filled the post of infrastructure minister with a fellow officer, thus confirming his growing reliance on the military. Still, the two referenda held last year—in April to approve the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, and on December 15—were firsts in Venezuela and have the potential for deepening democratic processes. In another novelty for Venezuela, the new constitution includes organizations of civil society (such as lawyers' guilds and university groups) in the process of naming judges and electoral officials.

Political reforms notwithstanding, Venezuela's democracy cannot function well if the "other half" of the population is excluded from social benefits. With an economic downturn encompassing the last twenty years, those lacking steady jobs in the formal economy now exceed half the work force. Chávez's constitution incorporates these people into the social security system, thus rescinding a law privatizing health and retirement payments approved by Congress months before Chávez assumed office.

Chávez's resistance to large-scale privatization, which in the past has favored U.S. multinationals, does not sit well with Washington. U.S. suspicion of Chávez is aggravated by his friendly relations with Havana and his refusal to allow additional U.S. military personnel to take part in hurricane relief efforts. Nevertheless, during Chávez's first year in office the Clinton administration refrained from criticizing his policies. Washington's moderation may stem from a previous embarrassing experience. Chávez, a polemicist like New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, thrives on aggressive opposition. During the presidential campaign in 1998, when the U.S. State Department denied Chávez's request for a visa, his popularity soared.

Chávez's appeal to the downtrodden and neglected sectors, his attempt to include them in the political and economic life of the nation, his adept use of the media and the military, and his ambitious development plans have helped maintain his popularity in the face of natural disasters, continued economic downturn, growing opposition from the Catholic church, and the fears of civil libertarians at home and abroad. At present, all eyes in Latin America are turned to Venezuela. Its success or failure will have continental implications. □

Steve Ellner, *a frequent contributor to* Commonweal, *teaches in the graduate school of political science at the Central University in Caracas.*

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CONFESSIONS OF A RELUCTANT CATHOLIC

Portrait of a novelist

Alice McDermott

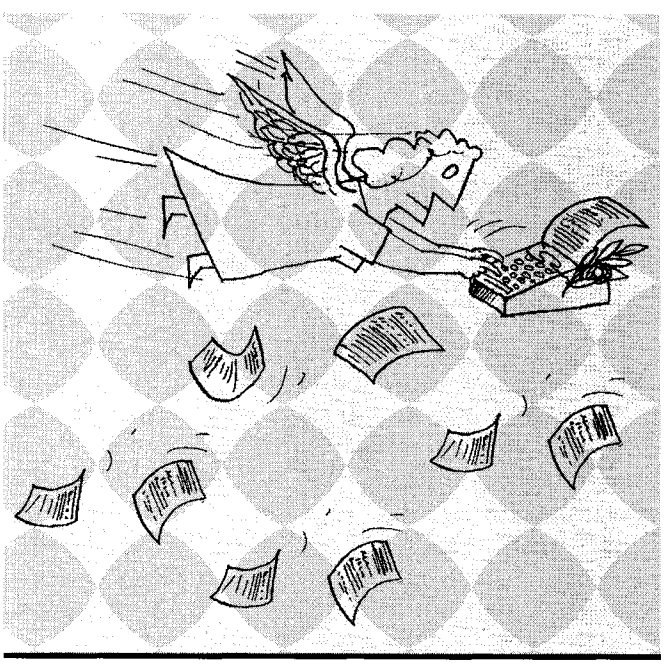
I am a Catholic by birth, third child and only daughter of two first-generation New York Irish Catholics who never paused to think twice (as they would have put it) about where or when or whether I should be baptized into the Catholic church (Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Albans, Queens, two weeks after my birth) or sent to Catholic schools (Saint Boniface School, Elmont, Long Island; Sacred Heart Academy, Hempstead), or whether Catholicism would ever become something less than essential in my life.

My family attended ten o'clock Mass every Sunday without fail, confession once a month on Saturday if the nuns hadn't taken care of it at school (or if our behavior required additional penance), and my brothers and I collected our sacraments—First Communion, first confession, confirmation—without hesitation or dissent, or, for that matter, discussion. We were instructed to say our prayers every night, although we only got down on our knees together when one of us carted home the big plastic statue of Mary with the glow-in-the-dark rosary beads in its base, and a family rosary was part of the homework. We each had our own set of beads, usually kept under our pillow, and there were a crucifix on the wall of my parents' bedroom, a small statue of Saint Joseph on the server in the dining room, another of the Blessed Virgin on my mother's dresser, and one on my own. My father carried a worn scapular. My mother put a holy card of Saint Jude in the back window whenever she was praying for good weather. One of my brothers was an altar boy, the other spoke about becoming a priest. We ate spaghetti with tomato sauce on Friday nights. We were Catholics as inevitably as we were ourselves: the McDermott family on Emily Avenue, and with about as much self-consciousness and, it seemed, volition.

When the changes in the church began and Latin was dropped and the altar turned around and fasting discarded and the nuns started showing up in street clothes, my parents accepted it all with good humor. These were not essential things, they seemed to understand, and seemed to convey to us without ever quite saying it. These were not things worth getting riled up about, as so many of our friends and neighbors seemed to be doing.

When my brothers and I began to rebel, in high school, driving to Dunkin' Donuts for an hour when my parents thought we were all going to Mass, throwing around words like hypocrisy and irrelevant and outdated, phrases like "opiate of the masses," throwing around arguments that began, If God really existed...,or, If you look at Jesus as just a historical figure..., or, Who really cares..., my parents formed two lines of defense.

My father, in the great tradition of Catholic fathers everywhere, proclaimed, "As long as you're living in my house you'll go to Mass on Sunday, " and then added, always, in a softer, wearier, but so much more effective tone, "Trust me. You'll need the church as you get older. You don't think you need it now, but as you live, you'll see. Trust me." An argument that was effective not so much because it made us return to the rituals of the church—it didn't, or at least it didn't



Alice McDermott *is the author of four novels, including* Charming Billy, *which won the National Book Award for fiction in 1998.* *This essay is a slightly edited version of a talk delivered last November at the Lincoln Center Campus of Fordham University in celebration of* Commonweal*'s seventy-fifth anniversary.* *Funding for Ms. McDermott's talk was provided in part by a grant from the Lilly Endowment.*

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for more than a Sunday or two—but because it was the only indication we had of what was at the heart of his determination to keep the laws of the church. My father had been orphaned at a young age, had fought in the war. This was the only indication we ever had of what, other than rules for living, the church may have provided him.

My mother, on the advice of a young priest from our parish and in deference to her own peace-at-any-price nature, simply told us that she would pray we'd go back to the church eventually, but she would not let the issue cause anger and unrest in our family.

Through our college years and in the years after, whenever we returned home, we were allowed to sleep in on Sunday mornings, if we chose, while my parents, still, went to ten o'clock Mass, their disappointment in us mostly disguised.

My brothers never did return to the church. And I, after years of semi-indifference, occasional rejection, political objection, and unshakable associations (no other cure for a sleepless night than a rosary counted off on your fingers, no better solace for unnamed sorrows than a candle lit in an empty church), find myself at middle age a practicing Catholic. A reluctant, resigned, occasionally exasperated but nevertheless practicing Catholic with no thought, or hope, of ever being otherwise.

I must confess (it's a genetic thing, no doubt) that it occurs to me that it doesn't bode well for our church at this millennium to have the likes of me as any kind of standard-bearer, and I offer this account of my own religious history only because it strikes me that it is similar to the religious history of many of us now middle-agers born into the Catholic faith. I offer you my own religious evolution not because it illustrates a triumph of faith but because it provides, perhaps, a place from which to talk about what brings us back, what leads us middle-aged born Catholics finally to choose the faith we were given from the very first moment of our lives. To a church we have, at various times in our lives, seen as flawed, irrelevant, outdated, impossible, and impossible to leave behind.

And I must admit—the confession thing again—that I come to the discussion itself somewhat reluctantly. Except when I am reading fiction—where the *I* is a creation all its own—the sight of too many first-person pronouns dribbling down a page tends to affect my reading mind in much the same way too many ice cubes dropped down my back affect my spine. I can hardly stand it. And when those first-person pronouns are put to the task of describing clichéd Catholic experiences (and at this point they're almost all clichés: mad nuns and dithering priests, glow-in-the-dark rosary beads, ridiculous moral and physical acrobatics performed in order to maintain and defy the letter of church law), I am most likely to close the book. I am most likely to throw the book across the room when these relentless "I's" are employed to describe a religious experience whose authenticity would be better confirmed if the author had faith enough to leave the experience out of the public venue, to leave it as a personal, unspoken thing between the believer and the believed in.

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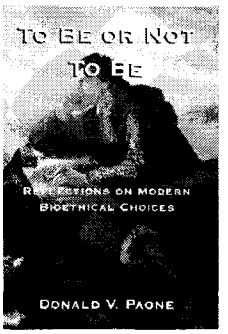

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But I recognize that my writer's life, my Catholic writer's life, carries certain obligations, and while I would much prefer wielding this unwieldy pronoun in a work of fiction, I proceed with the hope that something of my personal experience as a reluctant Catholic will be of value.

Flannery O'Connor wrote (in a letter, by the way, to a young writer who had reviewed *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* for *Commonweal* in 1955): "I feel myself that being a Catholic has saved me a couple of thousand years in learning to write."

I love the sentiment, but I find my own experience is both parallel and opposite. I find that learning to be a writer has saved me a couple of thousand years (in purgatory, no doubt) of being a Catholic.

As I hope I've made clear, learning to be a Catholic was not something that ever seemed to require much energy on my part. Learning to be a writer, however, had seemed to me from the outset to be an impossible pursuit, one for which I had no preparation or training, or even motive, except for a secret and undeniable urge to do so. In the initial days of my quest, when I was casting about for any kind of guidance, I came across a recording of William Faulkner reading from his novel, *As I Lay Dying*. I loved Faulkner's work and knew I would benefit in my reading of it by hearing the author's own tone and inflections ("My mother is a fish"). I listened avidly, and then continued listening as he went on to recite his Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

The speech is so familiar to me now, and so often quoted, that it is hard to convey what a revelation it seemed to me then, the very first time I heard it. Here was the master novelist saying concisely and precisely what I must do in order to learn to be a writer.

The young writer, Faulkner said, "must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid, and teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart—the authorities and truths without which any story is ephemeral and doomed."

Faulkner's injunction became the incentive and the goal for everything else I learned about fiction in those years—the incentive and goal for all matters of craft: how to create characters, how to use detail, how to set scenes, advance plot, write dialogue, all the writing workshop hints, bits of advice, tricks of the trade. All of it ephemeral and doomed if not put to the purpose of seeking out the verities and truths of the human heart.

Ironically, or perhaps predictably, I was not a practicing Catholic in those days, and when a novelist in one of my graduate classes proclaimed that fiction was the only altar at which he was willing to worship, I wholeheartedly identified. Because it seemed to me then that my reading life, and my nascent writing life, had indeed provided for me an altar as glorious, as complex, and as worthy as any I had known. It had seemed to me that through literature all the questions my Catholic upbringing had taught me to ask were raised and explored and illustrated in a far more compelling and intelligent way than ever I had heard in the old familiar gospel or from a Sunday morning pulpit: Who are we and why are we here and how should we behave toward one another, how should we think about ourselves, what are we to make of love and loss, our happiness and our sorrow?

Literature, it seemed to me, spoke of the undeniable fears and longings of being human: the fear that we are, ultimately, lost, ineffectual, trumped in all our pursuits and passions by death, though longing to discover otherwise. Fiction made the chaos bearable, fiction transformed the absurdity of our brief lives by giving context and purpose and significance to every gesture, every desire, every detail. Fiction transformed the meaningless, fleeting stuff of daily life into the necessary components of an enduring work of art. Fiction, if only briefly, if only in the space of the novel or the story itself, gave form to our existence, the form that it seemed our hearts so persistently desired.

It had seemed to me that through literature all the questions my Catholic upbringing had taught me to ask were raised and explored and illustrated in a far more compelling and intelligent way than ever I had heard in the old familiar gospel or from a Sunday morning pulpit...

But fiction revealed something else as well, something that I found I was stumbling on again and again in my own pursuit, and that was the very simple notion that fiction revealed our human heart's need for it. Fiction itself, even the most pessimistic fiction, the most absurdist fiction, revealed our need to see the stuff of life made into something that stands against time. Fiction itself—the making of stories and novels—revealed our determination not to be trumped by death. It revealed our determination to be redeemed.

It would be easy enough to dismiss as inevitable the eventuality that anyone with my background and upbringing would sooner or later start writing about Catholics, but as I remember it, it was Faulkner who got me there, not Saint Boniface School or Sacred Heart Academy. Because as far as I could see, there was enough being said in fiction about Catholics, and most of it was being said by writers who had actually read Augustine and Aquinas and who had, at some point in their lives, had priests over to dine. I had not. I had no particular interest in railing against the church or defending it. I had no reason to claim it had enhanced my life or done me irreparable harm. I had a good supply of mad nun stories in my experience, and all kinds of Catholic anecdotal ironies—my high school years were full of them—but so did most of my friends. None of it much interested me as material for fiction.

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What did interest me was this need for fiction, this need for the transforming power of art that seemed to me to be one of Faulkner's verities and truths of the human heart, and slowly, I began to discover that the church, Catholicism, gave certain of my characters a language they could use in order to talk about, and to think about, this longing. So for me, at first, it was simply a matter of craft: The language of Catholicism, a language I knew, had readily at hand, was a language I could use in order to pursue something I saw as enduring about the human spirit. I had to be very careful about it. I had to pare down the language of Catholicism, as I knew it, to what I saw as its essentials, in order to avoid getting caught up in the nonessentials, much as our Latin/fasting/priest-with-his-back-to-the-people and nuns-who-look-like-nuns neighbors had done those many years ago. But I knew that the questions I most wanted to ask as a novelist were the questions the church had already given language to. What I was not prepared to discover, or to rediscover, was that they were questions for which the church also provided answers.

There comes a time in the composition of a work of fiction when the writer must put aside all plans and intentions and preconceived notions of the work at hand and simply proceed, blindly, if you will, with the writing itself. It is the most difficult aspect of craft for a young writer to learn—this letting go—and it is linked in my mind to Faulkner's advice that the "basest" of all things is to be afraid, and teaching himself this, the young writer must "forget it forever." Seamus Heaney puts it another way: "We must teach ourselves to walk on air against our better judgment." Both writers, of course, are talking about faith. They're talking about the faith it takes to write, to lay down words upon the page even before we know the precise extent of their meaning, to forge ahead blindly into what we do not yet know or fully understand, to forge ahead in the hope that the pattern will reveal itself, that what we intuit will prove as valuable as what we have already confirmed.

The experience of my writing life and my reading life had taught me to pay attention to what appears at first to be only intuitive, to pay attention to repeated allusions, metaphors, recurring themes, even before I understood their meaning. There is some risk here. Not everything that appears on the page in the course of composition is useful, fully meaningful, and every writer has had the experience of eventually tossing out some theme, some narrative line, some gesture or detail that had once been avidly pursued but had finally proven irrelevant to the work as a whole. And yet, at the moment of composition, we must forget that possibility, we must walk on air, we must trust that somehow we will discover what we need, what our story needs, we must trust that through the persistent working at words we will discover something we would not have known otherwise.

Gradually, as the pattern of my own work began to come clear, I began to understand that this repetition of what might be called Catholic themes, Catholic language, had meaning that I did not at first recognize, meaning that went far beyond matters of craft and convenience and material at hand. Gradually—no lightning bolts here—I began to realize that the language of the church, my church, was not only a means to an end in my fiction but an essential part of my own understanding of the world. In my own understanding of the world, the authority and truth of the human heart revealed again and again our insatiable longing to prove that we will not be trumped by death, that our spirits endure, that our love for one another endures, and it is because of our love for one another that our hearts most rail against meaninglessness.

Time and again I discovered for myself, if not always for my characters, that the promises of my faith, of Christ, gave perfect answers to the questions my own work had raised. Proceeding blindly, walking on air, I had come to see a pattern emerge. I had come to see that the life of Christ, the Son of God whose death redeemed our lives, redeemed from absurdity our love for one another, made of our existence a perfect, artistic whole that satisfied, in a way that great art could only briefly satisfy, our hearts' persistent, insatiable need for meaning, for redemption.

Of course I'm referring here to faith in Christianity in general, not Catholicism in particular. But my writing life, life itself, had also begun to reveal to me a healthy sense of inevitability. There is also a time in the composition of a work of fiction when the writer realizes that he or she is committed to the work, to the completion of the work, come what may. It is a sense of both resignation and delight: This is my material, this is the story I have chosen to tell, this is the language I must use because the language itself, my own particular choice of words, has been shaped by the particular and cumulative experiences of my life and I would have to live another lifetime in order to discover an alternative. And while another lifetime, another writer, for that matter, with another life, another set of words, another story, may well produce another work that is far more entertaining or compelling or intelligent, this is mine, inevitably, and I am obliged only to make the best of it.

Catholicism, I began to see, was also mine, inextricably mine, the fabric of my life and my thoughts. It was the native language of my spirit, the way in which I had from the beginning thought about faith. And while I could acknowledge that there were indeed other languages for faith and that it may well be that those languages were more effective, less burdened by nonessentials, perhaps even superior to the language the Catholic church had provided me, I would have to live another life entirely in order to know them and to feel them as deeply or as inevitably as I knew and felt my Catholic faith. Resignation and delight: I am a Catholic after all. My only obligation, my profound obligation, is to make the best of it.

I do not want to give the impression that none of this would have happened if I had not had that initial, secret urge to write fiction. Learning to be a writer did not lead me back to the church, it merely helped me to understand

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what place the church has always had in my heart. Nor do I want to give the sense that life itself, life lived outside my writing life, had nothing to do with it.

As is the case with so many of my peers, my return to the church also coincided with the birth of my own children and the inevitable questions the birth of children raises: as in, how will they be educated, how will they learn to be good people, how is it I took so long to realize my parents did a pretty decent job after all? Twenty years ago no one could have convinced me that I would send my children to Catholic schools, but of course, now, that's where they are. Because I want them to have the ballast of faith, because I want them to understand the importance of the life of the spirit, because I want their moral education to have a context that exceeds human logic and understanding and gives to the whole of life that shapeliness that I had thought once could only be achieved, momentarily, by art. Because I know there will be times in their lives when they will need the church.

The last thing my father did in his life was to attend Mass on Easter Sunday. He collapsed leaving the church and died five days later. The novelist in me cherishes the significance of the details, the consistency and completion of the theme. The daughter finds comfort. The Catholic a strengthening of faith.

But neither do I want to convey that my recognition of the inevitability of my Catholicism frees me from any of the old doubts and dissents. Still I often feel when in the midst of things Catholic like a teen-ager trapped in a endless gathering of extended family. My church reiterates its insistence that women must never be priests and I metaphorically roll my eyes like some sixteen-year-old listening to the petrified logic of a doddering, but beloved, old uncle. A dynamic and inspiring parish priest is made secretary to the archbishop and I want to howl a childish objection at the sight of a talented young minister kept apart from the people so that he might hold an old man's cap. I find myself involved in a heated discussion with my fellow Catholic mothers about whether a priest was right or wrong to tell a woman she could receive Communion twice in one day and I hear my inner adolescent ask, "Excuse me, like, what century are we in?"

Prolife comes up, prolife, prochoice, profamily, prochild, and those among us who shrilly politicize, sloganize, bumper-stickerize this complex, personal, and heartbreaking moral issue make me want to bolt for the door. Stop shouting, marching, lobbying, I want to say. Try teaching. The incredible notion of the Redemption, the incredible notion of God made flesh, of one solitary human being, one ordinary death out of the billions of ordinary deaths the earth has witnessed, changing forever the fate of mankind, cannot be sustained, cannot logically be sustained, if any single life forever after becomes expendable. Any life, under any circumstances. The feminist in me wishes it were not so—a simple, uncomplicated vote for prochoice is my political preference—but the novelist bows to the need for logical consistency, for connectedness. If any one life can be dismissed as meaningless, so too can the life of Christ.

Like a teen-ager at some extended family gathering—like any of us, let's face it, at some extended family gathering—I have come to realize that it is not always easy to be a part of this family of the Catholic church. It is not always easy to have a sense of humor and a sense of irony and still be a part of this church. It is not always easy to escape the constrictions and the narrow-mindedness that the church has been responsible for. It is not always easy to feel hip and intelligent and modern while a part of this church. (I have silenced intrepid reporters with the news that I am a practicing Catholic. I have ended hip and intelligent and modern conversations simply by admitting that I still believe in my church.) It is not always easy to love the church, but then again, in my experience, it is not always easy to love anyone.

But I knew that the questions I most wanted to ask as a novelist were the questions the church had already given language to. What I was not prepared to discover, or to rediscover, was that they were questions for which the church also provided answers.

I suppose it's another lesson from my writing life. Or perhaps it's another inheritance from my Catholic parents who knew what was essential about their Catholicism and what was not, but I find I can dismiss my occasional impatience and annoyance with the church more easily these days. While my writing life has revealed to me something about the longing for rightness, for wholeness, for perfection of form, it has also shown me that this is a yearning for the unattainable. Our means, after all, are limited, our language flawed. Our art strains to define the indefinable. We approach, we may, momentarily, catch a glimpse, but we cannot sustain the vision. We fail, we try again. Faulkner himself said an author writes a second novel only because he didn't get it right the first time, and then another for the same reason, and another.

The church, as a human institution, isn't always going to get it right either. Its means are limited, its language imperfect. What the heart knows by intuition cannot always be fully expressed or defined by sermon or law. The heart knows the rightness of its yearning for eternal life; the heart, in its persistent desire for redemption, understands the power of God's love. Reluctantly, we submit to what it seems we have always known. We teach ourselves that the "basest" of all things is to be afraid, and teaching ourselves this, we forget it forever. Against our better judgment, we walk on air. We return to the faith that has always been our own. □

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Triptych:
Christ's Sermon to God from the Wilderness

1

To what, Father, shall I compare
the kingdom of man?
Shall I say it is like the son
who forsakes his father
for a landscape emptied
and shimmering as heaven,
where the light forgives
nothing, and the wind
strips the splintered shards
of bone? No metaphor
suffices, when to be human
is merely to live
in the blaze of your silence.
Yet for weeks now
I've spoken to you
of lilies and bridegrooms,
appealed to your logic
in sermons and parables—
and resorted, at last,
to the eloquence of hunger.

2

You who made me
neither lamb nor shepherd,
but a keeper of bees
who must approach the hive
slowly, and must feel
each unregenerate sting
blister his hands, to extract
the comb you cherish—

tell me, Lord,
has the flesh not made
the honey you feed upon?

And shall I call forth
the smoke of the spirit
to calm and confuse them,
now I have felt
the swarm that rages
in the chambers of the heart?

3

All morning I have held
this scorpion, and considered
how the spine curves
toward the raised barb of its malice,
and have watched it
stand poised there
in the shadow of my will.

Father, how to explain
why I wept
for its fierce perfection?
When it struck my palm
why did I not let go
and curse its name,
grind it
in the dust beneath my feet?

Yet this is what
I would have you understand,
having starved myself
so long, neither god nor man,
that I might pass
through the narrow gates
of both kingdoms: for the son
so loveth the Father
that he shall turn away
from His example
and teach Him the discipline
of mercy, the venom
that scalds the essential blood.

Morrie Creech

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Richard Alleva

METAMORPHOSIS MAN

'The Talented Mr. Ripley'

We are becoming fluid and many-sided. Without quite realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time. This mode of being...enables us to engage in continuous exploration and personal experiment. I have named it "the protean self," after Proteus, the Greek sea god of many forms.

ROBERT JAY LIFTON
The Protean Self

Certainly, Professor Lifton didn't have the hero of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in mind when he wrote the words above, but Proteus himself (or is it themselves?) would have sent Tom Ripley, as played by Matt Damon in Anthony Minghella's adaptation of the Patricia Highsmith novel, straight to the head of the shape-shifting class.

The young man is an impecunious music student eking out a living by tuning pianos and accompanying singers when the wealthy father of Dicky Greenleaf sends him to Italy to bring his playboy son back to the States. Approaching Dicky and his fiancée on an Italian beach, Tom is wearing bathing trunks and eyeglasses, and this combination, plus the paleness of his torso among so many sunbathed bodies, makes him look a classic geek. But he is a geek Proteus eager to darken his skin, shed his poverty and his past and even his personality, the last so nebulous that it seems not so much the expression of character as its stopgap. Ripley becomes the companion of the lordly Dicky (whose passions always turn out to be whim-whams): his stooge, pet, unofficial valet, sounding board, male Galatea. Then the situation becomes more intense as Tom witnesses Dicky's betrayal of his fiancée with an Italian girl, a seduction which leads to the latter's suicide. Now the geek becomes the playboy's scapegoat, ineffectual conscience, would-be lover, would-be doppelgänger. Then a boat vanishes, along with a blood-stained oar and a body. A distraught Tom Ripley shows up at his hotel's front desk to claim his key and the desk clerk mistakes him for Dicky. Tom hesitates, smiles, and acknowledges the clerk's salutation. Proteus has found a new shape.

In both Highsmith's novel and its French film adaptation, *Purple Noon* (1959, directed by René Clement), the hero is a conscienceless predator moving relentlessly toward his goal of living the good life. Alain Delon's pretense of being an American was risible but he captured Ripley's nervelessness so well, *too* well, that you felt he had planned Dick's demise from the very start. Consequently, though the film was diverting, you never gave a hang about Ripley's fate because, in a sense, he never had a truly human destiny, only a biological destination. A snake has to shed its skin; a snake has to devour its prey.

Minghella's film and Damon's performance have created a very different entity. This new Ripley has no strategy, only tactics. The killing of Dicky is no cold-blooded murder but an impulse of rage. When that desk clerk makes his error and Tom slips into Dicky's shoes, the impersonation takes on an improvisatory, let's-try-this-out-and-see-how-it-fits quality that makes the story suspenseful. Not only do we keep wondering if each ruse will succeed but also if Ripley will want to succeed. At one point, when Tom well knows how ruinous it would be to reencounter Dicky's fiancée, he shrugs and tells the police to show her into his apartment. An instant later, he pleads nerves and a headache and could she please come back later? This Ripley always has his wiles; it's his will that fluctuates.

Nor is this Proteus a complete sociopath, for he remains capable of fear, remorse, affection, self-hatred. Watching the opera *Eugene Onegin*, Tom weeps with recognition as the baritone slays his best friend in an excess of fury. Minghella isn't sentimentalizing the character: Ripley has to follow his initial manslaughter with two cover-up murders, and the last is so wrenching that we long for Ripley to be put away. We know he is a menace but he is a menace watching himself with shock and regret. Does this arouse our sympathy? Maybe not, but moral deteriora-

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tion is nearly always more dramatic than complete amorality.

What also keeps Ripley compelling is that Minghella is tapping into the sort of fantasy that even the most firm-souled of us have had from time to time. Contemplating the colorful but self-destructive doings of some famous person, we may think, "If I were he, I would be so much better at being he than he is." Couldn't one be Dylan Thomas without the binges or Sylvia Plath without the suicide or Hillary Clinton without the husband? When Tom, trying to cover up Dicky's murder, pens a suicide note purportedly by the dead man, he writes, "I've made a mess of being Dicky Greenleaf, haven't I?" Tom is determined to do better.

Minghella's script abounds in clever adumbrations and echoes. Boarding the ship to Italy, Tom strikes up a friendship with a fellow traveler who remarks admiringly: "I have so much luggage but you're so streamlined. " Yes, our hero carries little baggage of any kind, physical or psychological, and it is this freedom from the past that will later make him so nimble and so dangerous. Listening to a recording of jazzman Chet Baker's rather feminine voice singing "My Funny Valentine, " Ripley complains, "I can't tell if this is a man or a woman." But he himself, ostensibly heterosexual, will become sexually ambidextrous in the course of his imposture, and it is his homosexual fling with a nice music teacher aboard a luxury cruise ship that will lead to the movie's harrowing climax.

Minghella sets the story in the Italy of the early 1960s, the period of Anita Ekberg kissing Marcello Mastroianni in the Trevi fountain in *La Dolce Vita*, of Jackie Kennedy's triumphant tour of Europe, of the great days of the *Paris Review*, of international junkets that took American writers to Europe and French existentialists to New York. In short, it is the last period in which Americans walked like gods in the old world, spreading the gospel of jazz and action painting and William Faulkner and Humphrey Bogart. (Of course, we still influence Europe, but back then we were loved on the cultural level even by those—like Sartre—who hated America as a superpower.) Dicky, with his money, good looks, and fecklessness, is one of these American deities and Ripley is his votary, until the votary decides to become a god himself. Minghella and his cinematographer John Seale give us the paradisal Italy we saw in touristy romantic movies of the fifties and early sixties, such as *Three Coins in the Fountain* and *Rome Adventure* and, sure enough, this film has been accused of being too much of a travelogue to be a proper thriller. But the physical beauty that surrounds Dicky, Tom, and their various playmates not only contrasts with the ugliness of deceit and murder, it also fuels the criminality. All this luxe is to die for...and to kill for, too.

Matt Damon makes Ripley both innocent and devourer. Glasses on and grinning, he seems homely and gauche; glasses off and unsmiling, he is a dangerous pretty boy. As Dicky, Jude Law does an American update of his Lord Alfred Douglas from *Wilde*, which works because both characters are unstable, magnetic sybarites. The role of Dicky's fiancée comfortably draws upon Gwyneth Paltrow's ability to portray high-strung sensibilities. As a rich oaf who must come across as eminently killable, Philip Seymour Hoffmann, reprising his hot-potato-in-the-mouth WASP accent from *Scent of a Woman*, is juicily obnoxious. Jack Davenport gives the gay music teacher appropriate reticence but fails to supply enough charm behind the reserve. Best of all, Cate Blanchett, as an American heiress who falls for Ripley, endows a relatively small part with two layers. She immediately projects the insecurity of a woman just past her first youth in a period when it wasn't yet chic for a female to stay single too long. But under that tremulousness, Blanchett reveals the inalienable confidence of a woman who may see lovers come and go but will always have the money and class connections that cushion life's little ironies.

The Talented Mr. Ripley itself is a unusually layered thriller. Its surface is all bustle and sunlight and glamour, but through the physical splendor moves Tom Ripley carrying a void inside him. The glimpses we're allowed of that void mark the little corner of hell reserved for Proteus. □

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Robert P. Imbelli

Robert P. Imbelli, *a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, has taught at Saint Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie and the Maryknoll School of Theology. He currently teaches theology at Boston College.*

This symposium discusses

KATARINA SCHUTH

Seminaries, Theologates, and the Future of Church Ministry
An Analysis of Trends and Transitions
A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press $24.95, 258 pp.

In 1989, Sister Katarina Schuth published a pioneering study of Roman Catholic seminaries and theologates, *Reason for the Hope* (Michael Glazier). In it she provided valuable information and assessments regarding the efforts of Catholic institutions for ministerial formation to respond to the directions charted by Vatican II. She concluded that study on a note that was both realistic about the challenges and hopeful about the future.

Now, a decade later, in her new study, Schuth reviews the current state of these institutions. The goal of the new study is "to explore how and how well the schools are fulfilling their mission of preparing men and women for ministry in the twenty-first century." When asked bluntly whether she remains hopeful, Sister Schuth responds with an unequivocal "yes," but adds: "The reasons for hope have altered somewhat and new problems now confront us." Her study thus deserves the close attention not only of those immediately engaged in the ministry formation enterprise, but of all concerned with the flourishing of Catholic life in the new century.

Schuth, or members of her team, visited thirty-eight of the forty-two U.S. theologates that enroll candidates for the priesthood (many of them also serve laywomen and men preparing for ministry). Over five hundred-and-fifty interviews of faculty, administrators, and students took place. In addition, presidents or rectors of the institutions responded to extensive questionnaires, as did a random sample of faculty and vocation directors. Though the study attends to lay students enrolled in theologates, its main focus is seminarians preparing for the priesthood.

The book has four parts: The first provides an analysis of the current social and ecclesial context from which church ministers come and in which they must serve. Schuth has entrusted the essays in this part to three scholars who bring particular expertise to their task. Though appreciative of all three, I would single out that of Notre Dame historian Scott Appleby, to whose probing (and often sobering) reflections, "Surviving the Shaking of the Foundations: United States Catholicism in the Twenty-First Century," I shall return.

Part 2 ("The Mission and Members of Theologate Communities") and part 3 ("Formation Programs") focus on the present realities of the seminaries, conscious that the observations capture but a moment in the life of "dynamic and vital institutions, always engaged in change and modification." Accepting that qualification, these central parts of the study offer valuable statistics and perspectives on the multiple components and dimensions of seminary life. A relatively brief part 4 addresses "The Future," organizing its reflections under two headings: "Perceptions about Church and Ministry" and "Perceptions about Priesthood." Finally a "Conclusion" summarizes both the accomplishments of and some critical concerns facing the institutions.

In her conclusion, Schuth writes a line that captures much of the tenor of her study. "The church is in a period of enor-

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Dolores Leckey

Dolores Leckey *worked for twenty years on issues of lay ministry for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. She is now a senior fellow at Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University.*

The agenda item that received no press coverage at the November 1999 General Meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops may, in the long run, be the most important for the future of the Catholic church in the United States. The item in question was a report of a subcommittee on lay ecclesial ministry which was permitted one-and-a-half hours of agenda time (a largesse almost unheard of during the annual business meeting) to report its conclusions regarding the state of lay ministry in this country.

A panel composed of two bishops and two laywomen presented to the assembly, in crisp eight-minute summaries, the best and most current thinking regarding the theology of lay ministry, the formation of lay ministers, including their sense of vocation, the multicultural issues embedded in current and future developments, and the relationship between the ordained and the lay ecclesial minister. (The term lay ecclesial minister is a generic term and refers to those prepared for ministry in the church and who serve in a public, stable, recognized, and authorized manner.) The panel was followed by small-group discussions focused on these topics and a plenary session where questions and concerns were aired.

And what were those questions and concerns? To be sure there were a few bishops (newly ordained for the most part) who questioned the appropriateness of the term ministry in connection with lay service or employment. They worry about confusion despite widespread usage throughout the world for decades now. They also wonder if the term suggests competition with priesthood, although Bishop Gerald Kicanas,

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a panel member, precisely situated lay ecclesial ministry in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and gave explicit attention to the differences between ordained and lay ministry.

A few others expressed concern that the laity's primary vocation, namely strong families and the transformation of society, would be lost in the ferment of lay ministry. In fact, the subcommittee's report highlights the essential role of the vast majority of laity. "All of the laity are called to work toward the transformation of the secular world. Some do this by working in the secular realm; others do this by working in the church and focusing on the building of ecclesial communion which has as its ultimate purpose the transformation of the world." It is this latter group which is the subject of the report. And, indeed, a majority of the bishops are concerned about how these new ministers are being prepared. These bishops have come to terms with the reality of this historical moment, a reality shaped by the developing theology of ministry, a deeper understanding of priesthood, and by pragmatic necessity. "We should be asking ourselves how we can attend to the formation of these ministers more effectively," said one bishop who seemed to speak for many. (Formation is generally meant to include various aspects of ministerial education.)

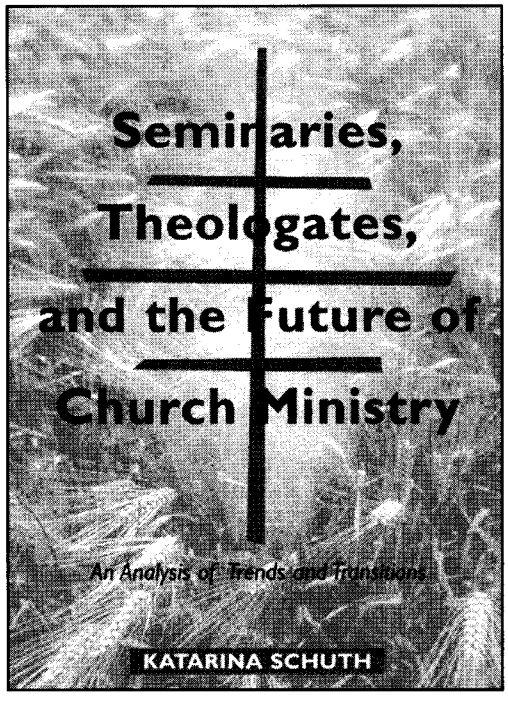
Sister Katarina Schuth's recent book can help answer these expressed concerns. Schuth's research and interests have been and remain seminaries, in particular theologates, and those who prepare for ministry therein. Over the years the arc of her inquiry has grown to include not only the men who are preparing for ordination, but the lay people (mostly women) who are preparing for other ministries. Many of these lay candidates are already deeply involved in church ministry: in parishes, on diocesan staffs, as chaplains on campuses, in

(Continued on page 26)

Daniel Aleshire

Daniel Aleshire *is executive director of The Association of Theological Schools.*

When a cultural geographer studies a community of schools, the result can provide a good map. When an exceptionally sensitive and skilled cultural geographer, such as Katarina Schuth, charts a territory, the result provides a map that not only identifies locations and boundaries, but also marks the ups and downs of the terrain. *Seminaries, Theologates, and the Future of Church Ministry* examines the context—students, faculty, and educational practices—of the institutions that educate candidates for ministerial priesthood and nonordained ministries in Roman Catholic parishes and other settings. Schuth's study, while charting the issues and practices of theological education for Roman Catholics, also describes several issues that are influencing theological education beyond the Roman Catholic community. As a Protestant theological educator, I want to highlight three areas.



1. Roman Catholic theologates, as this study describes them, have several contributions to make to the broader community of theological schools.

- First of all, these schools have developed a theological curriculum that provides a solution to some problems that Protestants have been struggling with for the past fifty years. This study describes Catholic theological education in the normative categories used in the U.S. Catholic bishops' *Program of Priestly Formation*: intellectual formation, spiritual formation, personal formation, and pastoral formation. Contrast these with the fourfold theological curriculum that has characterized post-Enlightenment Protestant theological education: Scripture, theology, history, and practical or pastoral studies.

The Protestant curriculum focuses on subjects, which are taught as disciplines, resulting in the educational assumption that if Scripture, theology, and history are learned sufficiently well, faithful practice and authentic spirituality will follow. Protestant theological education offers convincing evidence that this assumption is more durable than correct. The Catholic categories focus on the consequences of learning in the theological student, and they assume that authenticity in ministry requires the formation of candidates who know an array of subjects and skills.

Either construction of the theological curriculum can lead to failure, and Schuth's interviews show, in the judgment of rectors and faculty who care deeply about the theological formation of candidates for priesthood, that theological education constructed around these formational themes is not succeeding in the way that many would hope and that the church may need. These formational emphases do not prevent intellectual formation from gaining a privileged place in a seminary, but the categories in normative Roman Catholic use

(Continued on page 28)

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Robert P. Imbelli

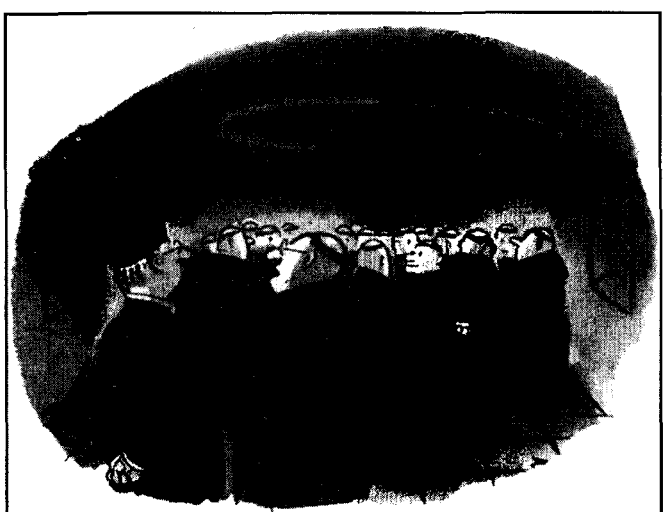
(Continued from page 22)

mous transition with heroic attempts being made to adapt to new conditions." In many ways seminaries and theologates stand on the frontlines of those transitions, and the attempted adaptations on the part of many faculty and others have indeed bordered on the quietly heroic. The impetus, of course, came from Vatican II itself, and its *Decree on Priestly Formation* (*Optatam totius*), which followed and drew upon the great constitutions on the liturgy and on the church. The document clearly reflects Vatican II's rich understanding of church, its new appreciation and commendation of the role of the laity, its openness to other religious traditions and to the social and cultural context in which the gospel must be embodied.

In contrast to Trent's reformist and centralizing thrust in erecting seminaries in a situation of near formational and educational anarchy, *Optatam totius* sought to devolve responsibility toward the local churches, entrusting to episcopal conferences the task of devising programs of priestly formation suited to local circumstances and needs. In the United States, the first such set of guidelines was issued in 1971; the fourth revised edition of *The Program for Priestly Formation* appeared in 1993. It drew upon the experiences of the preceding years and was greatly influenced by Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, his reflections on the 1990 synod of bishops dedicated to priestly formation. Thirty years after Vatican II, new emphasis was placed upon the uniqueness of the priestly vocation in the church, and the implications for spiritual and theological formation.

From the many insights and issues that Schuth's study lays before us, I single out four that struck me with particular force as challenges facing not only seminaries, but the entire church.

- First, there is the worrisome fact of an ongoing decline in the number of seminarians. Since the 1989 study was completed, seven seminaries have closed and the number of seminarians has declined by more than eight hundred. Were that statistic not sufficiently bleak, it is further depressed by the fact that the overall number of students includes a significant number from outside the United States who will return to their own countries upon completion of their studies. It is not surprising, then, to hear Schuth report: "Rectors/presidents listed the recruitment of both seminarians and lay students as a more critical and more problematic responsibility than any other that they face." Absent a critical mass of students, the most impressive programs risk languishing. The challenge cannot be remanded solely to rectors and presidents; it must effectively engage the entire community of believers.



"A marked feature with us—the community spirit."

- Second, joined to the declining seminarian population is the phenomenon (by no means unique to seminaries!) of a decline in the level of personal and intellectual preparation. Though there are many talented and capable students studying for the priesthood, others show marked weaknesses that seminaries must address. There are several, often interrelated, factors operating here. A lack of basic intellectual and cultural formation often forces seminary professors to engage in remedial work. A lack of religious literacy makes the study of theology seem difficult and excessively abstract to students and can foster a defensive anti-intellectual posture. A growing absence of intact families and of affective rootedness can lead to unrealistic demands being placed on relations with faculty and peers or, conversely, eventuate in a distrustful isolation. Seminaries, in the past ten years, have developed pretheology and continuing education programs to meet some of these needs. They have also expanded programs of psychological counseling and spiritual formation in order to address in greater depth issues of permanent commitment and celibacy within a cultural context often indifferent, if not hostile, to such commitment.
- Third (and linked to some degree with the previous point), one not infrequently encounters polarization among students and between students and faculty. Schuth comments: "In reflecting on the future of the church, respondents mentioned ideological differences and polarization within the church more than any other topic." One needs here to be wary of too facile generalization. To some extent the differences are experiential and generational. Many faculty knew firsthand the liberating openness inaugurated by Vatican II. On the other hand, many younger students react against the impoverished religious education of their adolescence and sense the loss of a "thick" and nourishing Catholic culture. Hence labels like "progressive" or "traditionalist" can often mask a more complicated and challenging reality.

Nonetheless, tensions do indeed exist and can, unfortunately, surface even in

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connection with the eucharistic celebration—the supreme irony of the sacrament of unity become occasion of division. Hence, in the course of the book, Schuth appeals several times to the Cardinal Bernardin-inspired Catholic Common Ground Initiative as a way of engaging issues in a spirit of respect and dialogue, hoping to make differences productive and not debilitating.

- Fourth, some of the polarization undoubtedly concerns the roles of women in the church and the pressing need for collaboration among ordained and lay ministers. Here, as elsewhere, Vatican II set in motion a process whose unfolding it scarcely foresaw and whose development holds considerable promise and commensurate challenge. Clearly, in this as in so much else, seminaries mirror the present reality of the church and cannot be expected to resolve all the issues, absent a wider ecclesial consensus. One particular dilemma posed to seminaries and theologates, however, concerns how to promote effective formation for collaborative ministry, while honoring the unique sacramental role of the priest in Catholic tradition and theology.

One finishes Schuth's study, then, with appreciation both for the real accomplishments of seminaries and for the acute challenges they face. It comes as no surprise to find, at the conclusion of her discussion of faculty, the honest and pointed comment: "Although much that is positive recommends the present situation for faculty, beneath the surface of the surveys and interviews a sense of unrest and uncertainty is evident." While some of the elements underlying the uncertainty are treated in part 4 of the study, they are primarily framed in ecclesial terms (a perspective both understandable and consonant with the focus of the study).

But, by offering a part 1, devoted to an analysis of the contemporary "context" for ecclesial life and ministry and especially by beginning with Appleby's "Surviving the Shaking of the Foundations," the book itself postulates the need to insert these ecclesial issues into a more comprehensive discernment.

Seminaries mirror the present reality of the church and cannot be expected to resolve all the issues, absent a wider ecclesial consensus.

Let me then suggest some dimensions of that wider reflection by drawing upon two striking assertions in Appleby's essay. Speaking of the Catholic culture wars that have consumed disproportionate time, energy, and media grapeshot since Vatican II, he remarks:

> While priests, women religious, and laity were busy constructing and inhabiting new religious and political identities and revising the curricula and pedagogy of Catholic religious education, they did not command the resources to battle the irreligious trends building in American society during the last decades of the twentieth century. Nor were they prepared to pass on to the younger generation a synthesis of old and new Catholicisms, old and new Americas, that they themselves had not achieved.

The intramural squabbling and partisan agendas of the past thirty-five years have often inhibited the discerning engagement with the culture that is imperative for a community of disciples called to be salt and light. Appeals to *Lumen gentium* or *Gaudium et spes* sometimes became only slogans for browbeating, rather than insights for appropriation. As one perceptive observer has characterized a too prevalent attitude: "We want ammunition, not ideas." As a result, no comprehensive pastoral and theological "synthesis" (to use Appleby's word) has emerged that cogently weds creativity and fidelity, diversity and unity, America and Catholicism. In its absence, fragmentation too often reigns.

Later in his essay Appleby hazards a prognosis that gives further pause.

> The besetting preoccupation of American Catholics as the new century dawns will not be the clash of postconciliar visions of authority, lay involvement, or women's rights in the church. Rather, the church will be engaged by a far more profound and disturbing crisis of belief and meaning. In light of the extent and depth of this crisis, the attention given to the Catholic culture wars will come to be seen as an unaffordable luxury.

In this light the recent and, I would add, courageous *Commonweal* Forum, "The Crisis of Liberal Catholicism" (*see Commonweal*, November 19, 1999), might, with great profit, be complemented by others. Appropriate bodies could convene forums on "The Crisis of Conservative Catholicism," "The Crisis of Liturgical Renewal," and "The Crisis of Catholic Religious Education"; even "The Crisis of the Bishops' Conference." My point is not to claim that there are no signs of hope, but to urge that, given the depth of the cultural challenge to Catholic habits of mind and heart, only profound spiritual detachment and discernment can even begin to identify the real issues. "Test everything," the earliest New Testament writing admonishes. "Retain what is good; refrain from every kind of evil."

If such critical discernment of spirits acknowledges and promotes the transformative breadth of the Catholic vision, a Christological imagination discloses its depth. Beyond an appeal for respectful dialogue, the Common Ground Initiative calls, more radically, to Christic conversion and commitment. Its inaugural statement, "Called to Be Catholic," unambiguously confesses: "Jesus Christ, pres-

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ent in Scripture and sacrament, is central to all that we do; he must always be the measure and not what is measured."

But this Catholic Christological and transformative imagination must be continually rekindled and renewed. The late Cardinal Basil Hume of England, in a lecture prepared for the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, sounded this refrain as he looked toward the new millennium. He stated his conviction that unity in the church would be dependent upon "a rediscovery of the centrality of Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life." What does it mean, in America of the twenty-first century, to confess Christ as the measure, to "prefer nothing to Christ" (as *The Rule of Saint Benedict* enjoins), to experience in Christ the recapitulation of all God's hope for humanity?

The finest service that seminaries could provide is to nurture communities of discernment where such questions are raised and wrestled with; to be places where a Christic vision and imagination permeate the celebration of liturgy, guide the style of theology, and inspire the boldness of pastoral initiatives. Then the full scope of the *Decree on Priestly Formation* might begin to be realized: *Optatam totius ecclesiae renovationem*, "the renewal, so greatly desired, of the whole church."

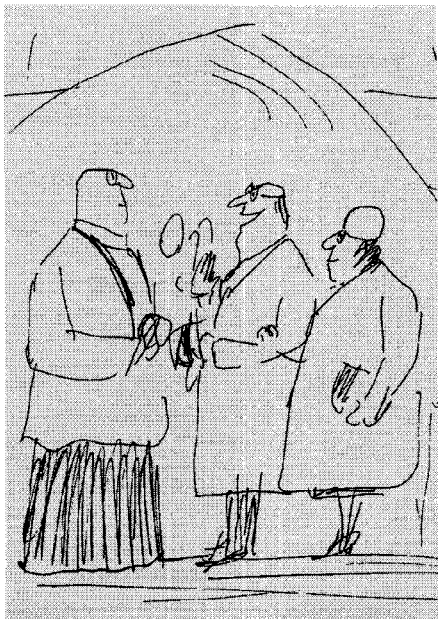
Dolores Leckey

(Continued from page 23)

hospitals, and in jails. Their pursuit of an advanced degree is a sign of their seriousness about their vocation.

Schuth and her research team have probed and dug and been in conversation with lay students and seminarians, faculty, administrators, and trustees about a host of issues from motivation to spiritual maturity, from seminary culture to intellectual competency for ministry. The digging has uncovered a treasure of information and analyses that deserves attention and which could assist church leadership in intelligent pastoral planning. I want to flag four aspects of this research, which affect the preparation of lay ecclesial ministers.

- The first is spiritual formation. While formation has come to include the whole educational enterprise in ministerial training, spiritual formation is a particular subset that refers to the somewhat hard-to-measure life in the Spirit. It appears that lay students are beginning to fare better in this regard, at least to those of us who like to mark progress more than decline. Seminaries, mindful of the directives set forth in the apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, issued in 1992, and the 1993 revision of the U.S. *Program for Priestly Formation*, both of which emphasize the priority of priestly formation and its specialized nature, and a few theologates also mindful of the need to provide solid spiritual formation for lay students, have allocated resources for this purpose. Spiritual direction is available, and days of recollection are regularly scheduled, as are longer retreats. Happily, the lay students are enthusiastic about these efforts on their behalf, and they appreciate faculty interest in the education/formation of the whole person. The situation was quite different twenty-plus years ago when the lay presence in seminaries was new and somewhat challenging.



"It was just great. With you on drums and God on bass...Wow!"

In the late 1970s I was invited to meet with lay Catholics who were enrolled at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, a coalition of various theologates. The students were distressed that the schools, while admitting them to class and accepting their tuition, were little concerned about their spiritual needs. One exception was the Franciscan School of Theology, where I was invited to a meeting to listen to the students' ideas about their needs and what might be done. Arriving a bit early, I knocked on the door of the Franciscan residence, and was greeted by a smiling friar, wrapped in an apron, waving a chopping implement with which he signaled me to follow him to the kitchen. The friar-chef was Kenan Osborne, O.F.M., then president of the Franciscan School of Theology, and more recently the author of *Ministry* (Paulist Press, 1993), a comprehensive history of the laity and lay ministry. He was preparing a meal for the lay students due to arrive at the appointed hour. There would be Eucharist, he said, the sharing of a meal, and, equally important, the sharing of life and faith among these hopeful church ministers-to-be. This was a regular Thursday evening occurrence, a hospitable Franciscan invitation, which placed spiritual formation within the context of human formation and relationships. That particular point—spiritual formation within human formation—is a major theme of Schuth's book, and marks the Franciscan school as a pioneer. Today, a few seminaries are following suit and, clearly, the lay students would welcome even more attention and help in matters of spiritual growth and development.

- The second aspect is intellectual formation. For the most part lay people come to seminary without the underpinning of philosophy that for many generations has been the foundation of theological study in the Roman Catholic tradition. Some seminarians complain about this, arguing that the professors are slowed down. (Obviously the semi-

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narians are anxious, being on a tight time line to qualify for ordination.) Schuth's research notes, however, that the lay students and the seminarians come from similar backgrounds, are influenced by similar cultural factors, and are products of similar religious education. The difference is that seminarians are often required to take pretheology, which brings them up-to-speed in matters of philosophy. What the lay students bring to the classroom, say the professors, is life experience replete with concrete illustrations that help illuminate certain theological concepts. Furthermore, their pastoral sense often is honed by that experience. The professors are less concerned about the philosophy gap. Like theologian Rosemary Haughton, they may think of theology more as a particularly exacting form of poetry than a philosophical construct. Still, it may be desirable for lay students, also, to dip into some pretheology work.

- Third is formation for collaborative ministry. One of the strengths of the seminary as a site for preparing lay ecclesial ministers is that it offers an early experience of collaboration. While the future holds different ministries and different roles for the seminarians and the lay students, these years of formation together, to some extent at least, promise a more trusting future for these workers in the vineyard. In a common environment the lay minister and the future priest can come to understand one another's thinking, aspirations, and awareness of God. They can come to appreciate one another as faithful Christians, serving Christ side by side. Their common efforts growing out of their unique vocation can strengthen the bonds of trust and truthfulness so necessary if there is to be a sustained and vibrant mission to the world. In the words of the subcommittee report, "Effective collaboration requires recognition of the basic equality of persons as well as necessary distinctions or differentiation in their roles and responsibilities." Increasingly church leadership is convinced of the necessity of collaboration.

- Fourth is the issue of finance. Theologates are now enrolling lay students in record numbers. And, with few exceptions, these students are paying their own way. Schuth is clear that there is a dearth of scholarship money. And this is a problem. The question of how lay students can finance their theological education has been central for years. In the early days they went heavily into debt, but today, according to her research, they are reluctant to do so. By now they know that low ministerial salaries will have them paying forever, and they are dealing with the problem in several ways. Typically, lay students attend part-time, which has benefits and losses. The course of study takes much longer, but there is also more time to integrate what one learns into one's life and work

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patterns. Others may choose to pursue studies in a Catholic college or university where funding is sometimes available. (At least one university fully funds the lay students.) While the academic preparation may be excellent, Schuth is concerned about the quality of pastoral training, which is an essential component in seminary curriculum. Still other lay students choose a Protestant divinity school which may have more resources, but which lacks a Catholic environment, not to mention theology. And, of course, a number of dioceses have established their own lay ministry programs which are usually affordable, with a delivery system designed for adults with other responsibilities. All of these academic settings are educating the church's future lay ministers.

But Schuth suggests, and with some justification, that the seminary is the preferred setting for the preparation of all ecclesial ministers. Her logical conclusion, therefore, is that adequate scholarship funds "are absolutely vital for the ongoing viability of the schools and the competence of their graduates." A number of bishops, seeing the problems that an ill-prepared ministry will engender, are already in her corner. They are aware that increasingly the faith of our fathers and mothers will be transmitted by laity who will evangelize, prepare children and adults for the sacraments, teach the ways of prayer and contemplation, articulate the principles of Catholic social teaching, and bring the Eucharist to patients in hospitals and nursing homes. In fact, they are already doing so. Moreover, examination of the data suggests ministers may soon represent the church at critical moments of life and death, at the graveside, for example, as our bodies are prayed into the earth. (That, too, may already be happening in some places.) I, for one, would like the minister to be well prepared for these final rites. It doesn't matter if I know what's going on at graveside. My grandchildren will know, and that does matter.

And before that becomes the norm, it's a story worth tracking.

Daniel Aleshire

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provide a more helpful formulation of the educational task of learning for religious vocation.

- Second, Roman Catholic theologates have a deep connection with the church. Many Catholics worry about the connection, which at times seems too intimate. Theological schools can provide a context for critical reflection on the church's teaching and practices, and too close a connection can keep the schools from engaging this task, and thereby deprive the church of this critical, potentially renewing analysis. Too tight a connection, in a church with a teaching magisterium and

The United States is becoming increasingly multicultural and multi-ethnic and any religious community that hopes to be "American" must be inclusive of this growing racial and cultural minority population.

Ex corde ecclesiae, can dissipate this possibility for renewal. But the patterns of renewal a theological school can bring to a community of faith require a fundamental sense of connection. The connection causes listening, even when the church or the seminary doesn't like what it is hearing. On more than one accrediting visit of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) to a diocesan seminary, I have heard a bishop say, in response to questions about small enrollments and the cost of education, that the diocese needs a seminary for more than the education of lay and priesthood candidates; it needs a center of theological reflection on its work; the parishes need the resource of theologians who can enrich and inform their work. Many theological schools, outside the Roman Catholic community, are experiencing increasing degrees of separation from their founding ecclesial constituencies.

The separation causes seminaries to speak increasingly generically, because they no longer have a particular community that will listen, and the church that founded the seminary shops the marketplace of religious ideas and innovations for the ones that hold greatest short-term promise. While there are problems with a tight connection to the church, the increasing problem many seminaries are experiencing is a lack of meaningful, if not mandatory, ties that bind the work of the theological school to the needs of the faith community.

- A third contribution that Roman Catholic theological education can make to the broader community relates to the education of students for the increasingly multiracial and multicultural composition of the church.

Almost one-fourth of seminarians in theologates, according to this study, are American racial and ethnic minorities. The United States is becoming increasingly multicultural and multi-ethnic, and any religious community that hopes to be "American" must be inclusive of this growing racial and cultural minority population; to be inclusive, it must have ministers and priests who have come from these communities and know them intimately and well. No Protestant church body can claim the percentage of racial, cultural minority seminarians that the Roman Catholic community claims, even though they wish they could. This study identifies the problems of educating multicultural seminarians for a multicultural church. Roman Catholics, however, have more experience in addressing these problems than any other religious community in America. In an interesting way, the immigrant church at the turn of the twentieth century has become the most "American" church at the turn of the twenty-first. The problems of educating persons to serve in the culturally complex contexts emerging in America are im-

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mense, and all of theological education can benefit from the Roman Catholic experience of attending to cultural uniqueness while cultivating common religious identity.

2. Many of the concerns addressed by this study parallel the concerns in the broader community of theological schools. Some of these have to do with student and faculty issues, and others relate to the broader communities of faith.

- The study describes sensitively the problems associated with students whose capacity to serve as religious leaders seems limited by their cultural embeddedness, their intellectual capacity, their tendencies toward a religious conservatism that inhibits a breadth of religious understanding, and, in a Catholic context, assumes that pre-Vatican II practices are somehow more orthodox than practices and reforms mandated by Vatican II.

The particular expressions of this phenomenon differ by denomination among the community of theological schools, but the same religious tendencies and problems of capacity are evident. Like this study, the evidence for these problems is derived from interviews with persons who care about theological education, and who have a history of experience in it. The current conventional wisdom is that some students are as talented and capable as have ever attended theological school, but these students do not constitute as high a percentage of the student body as they once did. The least talented students are, many fear, less able than the least talented students of earlier generations. Whatever their level of talent or ability, students across the spectrum of ATS-related schools seem to come to theological schools lacking deep roots in their religious traditions: If they have been life-long Catholics, for example, they seem to know less about Catholicism than previous generations of Catholics, and if they are new to a religious tradition in which they hope to serve, they know little about its theology and ecclesial structures, let alone its folkways and patterns of piety. These are serious problems for most religious communities, and what this study hypothesizes about Roman Catholic students is generally perceived to be true of many students, across denominations, entering theological study.

Ever so gently, Schuth introduces another problem that emerges in the context of her extensive interviews: There is a struggle with authority and certainty among students, and probably in the church itself. Religion, especially confessional Christianity, has always concerned itself with authority and certainty. Believers do not believe simply because they thought it up on their own: The Christian tradition stands on a variety of traditions that are considered, or have been declared to be, authoritative.

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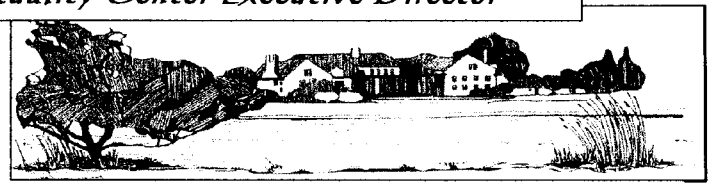

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Most Christians are quite certain about some things: God is loving, not hateful; God chooses good over evil, redemption over destruction, life over death. What Katarina Schuth's interviews seem to point to, however, is a group of people who value certainty and authority more than the religious convictions that are served by appropriate systems of religious certainty and authority. In an age of pluralism and postmodern popular relativism, some people cease using certainty and authority in their proper "supporting roles" to important religious truths and use them instead in their own "starring roles," as if certainty and authority had intrinsic religious value. This affection for the certain or the authoritative is not solely a Catholic issue; it has caused more than a few religious battles among Protestants over the past twenty years, with resulting tensions in congregations and parishes.

- In addition to these student issues, this study identifies an issue about faculty: They are overstressed by their workloads, frustrated with the variety of demands that are placed on them, and struggling with lower compensation than many of their peers in colleges and universities receive.

These are not uniquely Catholic problems; theologate faculty just have their particular version of them. The work of faculty in all theological schools is increasing, in part, because the subject matter for which they have a scholarly responsibility has increased. The work of the teacher increases when the students know less about the subject than they used to know, and when they are more resistant to the conclusions a professor has to profess. These are problems that almost any faculty in a theological school related to The Association of Theological Schools could describe. Of the several issues that have been identified with faculty, what may be most uniquely Roman Catholic is the shift that Schuth documents from a faculty comprising a vast majority of priests and vowed religious to a faculty that is increasingly lay. Laity take compensation, tenure, contracts, and other aspects of the industry of higher education more seriously than diocesan or religious faculty members took them in the past. In this respect, Catholic theologates begin to look more like other theological schools.

- This study also notes the complexity of theological formation because the church itself seems to be changing. Although the changes now must seem less revolutionary to Roman Catholics than the changes that resulted from Vatican II's reforms, the church is experiencing substantive change. Scott Appleby's thoughtful introductory essay to this volume summarizes some of the changes in Catholic culture that translate into laity who have less education and formation in faith than previous generations of laity have had. These characteristics constitute the Catholic version of a phenomenon that most other religious communities in the United States are facing. The patterns of religious hegemony that formed Presbyterians and Methodists, Lutherans and Baptists, Catholics and Congregationalists have all dissipated since World War II. The interviews for this study noted problems with changing patterns of worship and church attendance. Catholics have no exclusive claim to this phenomenon and the problems it introduces: There are Protestants at war with one another about the hymns they should sing and the patterns of worship they should embrace.

3. Finally, there are some conventions in non-Roman Catholic theological education that this study suggests are becoming more evident in Roman Catholic theologates, and I think these latter institutions will continue to benefit by paying attention to two of these conventions.

- During the past fifteen years, both diocesan- and order-related schools have learned how the ecclesial and canonical concerns of episcopal or superior authority can be accomplished through tiered board structures that provide more inclusive participation in institutional governance as well as more support of each school. These more Protestant board structures have generally proved to be beneficial to theologates, as Schuth documents in this study, and merit continued attention.

For as long as Roman Catholic schools have been a part of ATS, one of their distinguishing characteristics has been shorter terms of service of senior administrators, particularly rectors and deans. A general perception in ATS schools is that longer terms of administrative service typically benefit the schools. The increase in the length of service for rectors and deans that this study documents is promising. The work of the theological school is increasingly complex, and it takes time for senior leaders to learn their jobs, move institutions in directions that are needed or desired, and consolidate the changes into institutional practice.

This study, particularly with the history defined by *Reason for the Hope*, Katarina Schuth's first mapping of theologates, provides a definition of Roman Catholic theological education that simply does not exist for any other major community of schools in the United States. It is as sensitive as it is valuable. It addresses issues that define the fault lines in the church in the United States, and it does so with the honesty and humility that invite dialogue rather than diatribe. It provides the kind of map that helps schools understand both their unique situation and their common problems. I could only wish the rest of theological education had as helpful a descriptive resource. □

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William L. Portier

IN DEFENSE OF MT. SAINT MARY'S

They are evangelical, not conservative

Last Easter Sunday (April 4, 1999), the New York Times Magazine *ran a long cover story titled "Why a Priest" by Jennifer Egan. The story featured three students from Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, and interviewed many others. Egan's profile joined a sympathetic portrayal of the seminarians with an emphasis on their stance as "signs of contradiction" to the world. But far from battle-weary agents of negativity, Egan's "conservative" seminarians seem happy and idealistic: "A mood of buoyant optimism surges among the men, a sense, accurate or not, that the bad times are over for the priesthood, and something new and momentous is in the making."*

Egan's story touched a nerve. Among many dismayed by its tone was Commonweal. *Its editorial (April 23, 1999) said that "seminaries like Mount Saint Mary's are preparing priests to serve a church in full retreat from the modern world." William Portier, who teaches at Mount Saint Mary's College and has observed the seminarians of Mount Saint Mary's Seminary for some twenty years, offers an alternative explanation.*

The future of Catholicism in the United States would be better served if we understood the Mount Saint Mary's seminarians, and others like them, as forward-looking "evangelical" Catholics rather than "conservatives" looking back to an idealized 1950s. My reading rests on the view that the dissolution of the American Catholic immigrant subculture offers a better explanation of these younger Catholics than an older generation's conflicted experience of Vatican II. The two are admittedly difficult to disentangle. But a comparison of the council's reception in the United States with its reception in other countries, where it did not always result in a polarized "unholy alliance" between liberals and conservatives, highlights the central place of the subculture's dissolution in our own history.

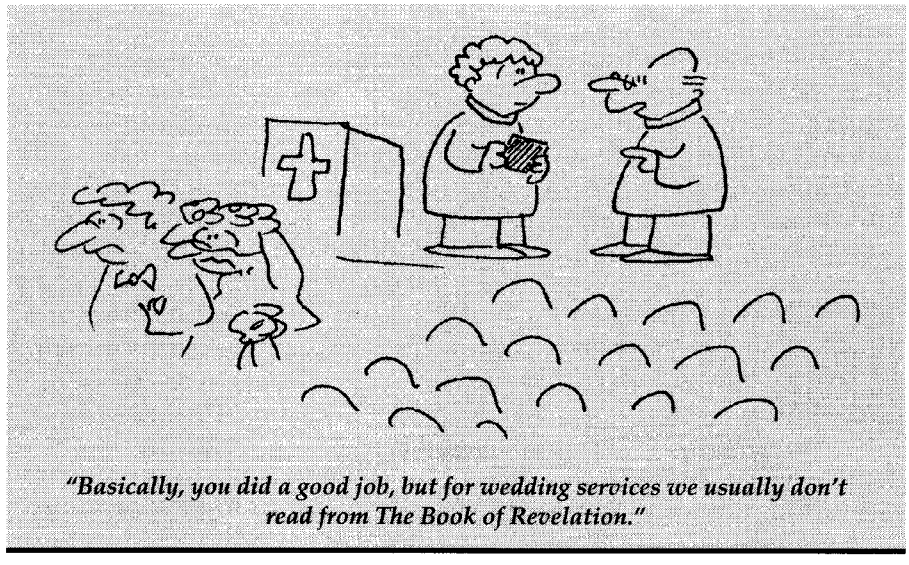
From this perspective, and with due allowance for the predictable excesses of "first fervor," the seminarians Jennifer Egan profiled are doing a new thing. They can be seen as engaging with the world, but in an evangelical mode appropriate to our post-subculture condition. If Mount Saint Mary's Seminary did not exist, a church in transition from immigrant subculture to evangelical witness in a pluralistic world would have to invent it.

Why "evangelical"? Somewhat foreign to Catholic ears, the term evangelical designates, historically and sociologically, those forms of Christianity especially fitted to modern social and cultural conditions, especially pluralism. Baptists and Methodists on the nineteenth-century American frontier were the first to catch on to religious pluralism's evangelical imperative. Personal conversion and public witness are central to the evangelical ethos.

Each of Egan's seminarians has a conversion story and tells it eagerly as a form of witness. In the pluralistic religious setting in which a great many American Catholics now live, such witness helps to establish and maintain the boundaries once provided by an enabling but, in the end, confining immigrant subculture. Should we be surprised that the "distance traveled from obedient, rule-following careerist to obedient, rule-following seminarian" is deceptively short? Hasn't conversion in evangelical America always seemed so to those who observe it from without? Aren't a convert's subsequent fidelity and growth more religiously significant than a conversion's ironies?

What really convinces me in preferring *evangelical* over *conservative* is the seminarians' marked contrast with the 1950s as I remember them. Back then, only "converts" told conversion stories. I never heard a Sunday sermon about contraception or masturbation; such delicate topics would have been treated in confession or on a single-sex retreat. In contrast to the age of Eisenhower, the following stories show contemporary Catholics investing significantly in dramatic forms of individual religious witness that go beyond the example of a good life in the world.

• My own introduction to the Mount Saint Mary's seminarians (as a new college faculty member) in the fall of 1979 was a bit overwhelming. Walking into the library one afternoon, I found fifty young men in Roman collars sitting in the main reading room. At first I thought I had crashed a 1950s' Catholic Theo-



"Basically, you did a good job, but for wedding services we usually don't read from The Book of Revelation."

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logical Society of America meeting. But, as it turned out, I had inadvertently interrupted library orientation for first-year theology students. I thought only deacons wore collars. Welcome to Emmitsburg and a taste of what turned out to be the future.

- More recently, I watched as seminarians filed into the main chapel on a Sunday afternoon to sing vespers. They all wore cassocks and surplices. This could have been a scene from the fifties except for the incongruous sight of the seminarian at the head of the procession. He was swinging the thurible in a one hundred and eighty-degree arc. How would the priests who taught me to serve benediction have responded to such an extravagant display? If our contemporary thurifer had been a 1950s' basketball player, my old Irish pastor would have benched him for being a hot dog.
- A couple of years ago, at noon Mass in a dorm chapel without pews or kneelers, I watched in amazement as a seminarian nearly touched his forehead to the floor in a solitary act of reverence after the elevation of the consecrated host and chalice. If this had been the 1950s, everyone in the congregation would have performed this act of reverence or no one would have.

These three acts of "witness" offended my Catholic sensibilities, formed in the subculture of the 1950s and early 1960s. They struck me as examples of drawing undue attention to oneself. I can think of older Catholics, more "conservative" than I, who would share my response. But are our sensibilities still normative for a coming generation? I experience a similar liturgical dissonance on Sunday mornings in my parish when I hear a church full of Catholics singing "Amazing Grace" or "Just a Closer Walk with Thee."

During my years at Emmitsburg, I have come to see these seeming anomalies as examples of American evangelical Christianity in Catholic form. Even so, I recognize in Egan's seminarians the same spiritual exhilaration I felt as a young religious in 1967 when I was sent from a rural seminary to finish college at Loyola University in Chicago. It is an exhilaration that comes from being in the middle of things and knowing that your holy dreams have time on their side.

...it's a "new breed." Having already lived in the middle of the modern world, these seminarians have chosen to engage it in evangelical forms.

But, no, this is not the 1950s. Rather, as Andrew Greeley once wrote of another generation, it's a "new breed." Having already lived in the middle of the modern world, these seminarians have chosen to engage it in evangelical forms. But this new breed's appropriately evangelical preoccupation with witness comes with its own kind of temptation. Sometimes I try to imagine how challenging it must be for seminary faculty, formed largely in the older subculture, to guide today's seminarians through the peculiar religious perils of evangelical witness. Its spiritual perils are not those of seminarian and clergy grown up in the subculture, whose powerful collective ethos threatened to absorb their individual identities. Rather the spiritual perils of evangelical witness have to do with individualism and the divisions that follow from it.

Consider the seemingly trivial example of grace before meals. Imagine a 1950s' seminary. All the seminarians come into the dining room at the same time. The rector or another faculty member leads grace. They all say it together. No one is there to watch. Grace before meals in an evangelical mode is quite different. First, the seminarians come in individually at different times. They make the sign of the cross and say grace silently and individually. Even if a number come in or leave together, they appear to pray, not together but individually at the same time. This grace before meals is an individual act of piety but it is also intended to be witnessed, by other seminarians, college students, and faculty, all of whom need to be evangelized.

Given the pitfalls of individualism that we see in the history of American evangelical Christianity, an emphasis on church authority among evangelical Catholics should come as no surprise. Authority in a well-defined subculture may have seemed stifling. But in a more open and pluralistic culture, some young Catholics may welcome authority as helping to center their lives and define their common identity. This outlook is no more pathological than the routine authority problems of earlier generations. We should expect that the personal conversions and public witness of evangelical Catholics will be negotiated through practices that are recognizably Catholic, for example, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and the priesthood, devotion to Mary, and reverence for the papacy. The latter is especially distinctive in an American setting.

The pope is at the heart of evangelical Catholicism. In response to the *Commonweal* editorial (*see* Correspondence, July 16, 1999), Father Kevin Rhoades, rector of Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, cast his seminarians as timely rather than retrograde, signs of "the new springtime of the church," inspired by the teachings of Vatican II and the example of John Paul II. As the premier contemporary Christian evangelist, the pope's journeys on behalf of the gospel are unprecedented in the history of the papacy. Even those who argue that he has overwhelmed the office with his person cannot deny that he embodies a Catholicism engaged with the world in an evangelical form. *Gaudium et spes* inspires his Christocentric humanism and references to it dot his work. It is significant that, rather than Egan's "last counterculture," Father Rhoades talks about training seminarians for the "evangelization of culture" according to the vision and teaching of *Gaudium et spes*, *Evangelii*

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nuntiandi, and *Ecclesia in America*. With their emphasis on personal conversion and a comprehensive understanding of evangelization, the latter two documents offer theological substance for an evangelical Catholicism suited to witness in a pluralistic world. As both Egan and Rhoades insist, this witness always includes service to the poor.

On an increasingly diversified religious landscape, both within and beyond Catholicism, Mount Saint Mary's seminarians and other evangelical Catholics represent the sort of clearly defined choice pluralism requires. They are here to stay, but they are not the only choice.

The very notion of evangelical Catholics raises questions about the future of "liberal" Catholics. As the loyal opposition or safety valve of an immigrant subculture, liberal Catholics were never the majority. Since liberal Catholics are, in good measure, a function of the subculture, they make little sense apart from it. Perhaps this is why they have not replicated themselves on the scale of the hopes inspired by Vatican II.

Liberal Catholics have lived long enough to become what younger generations want to get beyond. In working for a new future, liberal Catholics will have to engage not only with the world, but also with younger evangelical Catholics who do not, in the manner of Durkheim's *homo duplex*, carry the Catholic subculture around inside themselves. Twenty years at Emmitsburg have taught me that those who experienced Vatican II as adults, whether liberal or conservative, are no longer in sole possession of the future agenda for American Catholics.

Catholics are now experiencing the full brunt of American religious pluralism and voluntarism. In establishing new boundaries and identity, Mount Saint Mary's seminarians have sometimes, in my experience, gone to extremes. But, on the whole, Father Rhoades is justified in questioning such harsh criticism of people who are "still in formation." Like most interesting religious people, Egan's seminarians are making the sort of creative appropriation of the past that, if done by more sympathetic or exotic figures, we might call inculturation. They are religiously alive. After their ordinations, parishioners and others will help complete their formation. How all this will turn out is not yet clear. Especially on issues such as the pope's "mystical theology of the body," with its implications for the momentous issues of our time, Egan's seminarians must be engaged rather than dismissed. We need to learn what they have to teach us about American Catholicism. Should liberal Catholics fail to throw their true gifts into the new post-subculture mix, future answers to questions about how to be Catholic in the United States after the subculture will be missing key ingredients. Much of what was good about being Catholic in the United States during the past three decades will be lost to the church. □

William L. Portier *is Henry J. Knott Professor at Mount Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Maryland.*

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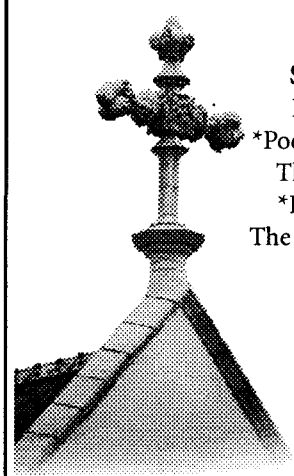

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Bobby, we hardly knew ye

In Love with Night
The American Romance with Robert Kennedy
Ronald Steel
Simon and Schuster, $23, 210 pp.

Charles R. Morris

I once attended a preseason professional football game in Philadelphia—I believe it was the summer of 1965—at which Robert Kennedy was the guest of honor in connection with a charitable fundraiser. Kennedy was introduced at half time, said a few words, and then with two or three other men, walked around the running track that circled the field. The crowd stood and roared—and roared. And, as he walked, Kennedy's scrawny, somewhat hunched, figure grew and glowed, until he towered over the men walking with him. This wasn't me—I wasn't a special fan of the Kennedys, and I wasn't cheering—but yet the figure glowed.

Max Weber called it charisma, the strange power possessed by prophets and saviors, by heroes and demagogues, by the Gandhis and the Hitlers alike. Robert Kennedy surely had it. *Why* he had it is the puzzle that the distinguished biographer and historian Ronald Steel sets himself to explain in this elegant little volume—why "American liberals, and even many conservatives, fell in love with Robert Kennedy"; why he "remains the standard by which millions measure, and find wanting, today's politicians"; why a generation after his death, as a reporter recently wrote, "the yearning for Robert Kennedy—or somebody like him—is an open wound in some parts of America."

It cannot be said that Steel succeeds. He has culled the vast published literature on Kennedy to produce a shapely biographical essay, a skeptical account of the creation of a legend. But he does not come close to explaining what an alarmed Barry Goldwater, in 1966, called the "religious fervor building up about this guy"—the peculiar messianic appeal of a politician who, as Steel writes, "had a squeaky voice, wore ill-fitting clothes...appeared even shorter than his average height because of a pronounced stoop...[who] lacked skills of delivery and had none of the orator's ability to move crowds."

Certainly, there was not much to like about the viciously competitive young man who rose to become the all-powerful de facto deputy president in his brother's administration. The socially awkward athletic wannabe became the ruthless prosecutor who vied with Roy Cohn for the top job on Joe McCarthy's investigative committee, and later wept at the news of McCarthy's death and accompanied the body to its burial plot. Like Ahab, he hounded teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa for more than a decade, bending every rule of evidence and prosecutorial ethics until he finally landed his prey.

Later, as attorney general, when he learned that J. Edgar Hoover was on the trail of Ellen Rometsch, an old paramour of Jack's who also happened to be an East German spy, he summarily deported the lady and threatened the *Washington Post* with an antitrust suit if they published an account of the incident. Executives from the steel industry who opposed the administration's economic program were targeted for harassing tax investigations. Kennedy was the architect of Operation Mongoose, the terrorist operation in South

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Vietnam that Graham Greene skewered in *The Quiet American*, and oversaw the many attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro. His support for civil rights activists was always tardy and resentful.

It is Kennedy's intensity, his brooding sense of Gaelic-Catholic guilt that elevate him from soulless operative to tragic figure. Jack's assassination came like a bolt of retribution, especially since Kennedy never quite convinced himself that it had not been engineered by Castro or the Mafia: "It was Bobby who had hounded the Mafia; who had goaded the CIA to get rid of Castro; who knew of his brother's connection [through his mistress Judith Campbell] to the very Mafia don the CIA had hired to kill the Cuban leader. The psychic weight of such a burden of knowledge and responsibility must have been enormous....This is the horrible irony he carried with him and kept secret until the day he died. He had trafficked in the darkest realms of conspiracy and murder, and he had brought this fate upon himself. It was the classic definition of Greek tragedy."

Robert sank into a deep depression after the assassination, but as soon as he recovered began setting up a virtual Kennedy government-in-exile in quiet opposition to Lyndon Johnson, for whom he had the coldest of hatreds. It was all the more humiliating to have to call on Johnson to rescue his faltering New York senatorial campaign against the bumbling but likable Republican incumbent, Kenneth Keating. For a man of such legendary political skills, the New York campaign was oddly off-the-cuff, casual to the point of carelessness. But once elected, Kennedy shrewdly began to limn the Democratic "third way" later seized upon by Bill Clinton, the leaders of the New Democratic Coalition, and more recently by Tony Blair. His well-known Bedford-Stuyvesant renewal project emphasized business involvement and small, self-sustaining commercial projects, in pointed contrast to the sweeping government programs so loved by Johnson.

Steel's sympathies for Eugene McCarthy are everywhere apparent in his account of the 1968 campaign. (He even implies, without documentation, that Kennedy hoped to displace Hubert Humphrey as Johnson's running mate, which is implausible.) Kennedy's late entry into the race, after the New Hampshire primary in which McCarthy had proved Johnson to be vulnerable, was cynically opportunistic.

But Steel makes a strong case that Kennedy was not going to win the nomination, even after the fateful victory in California. Although he had beaten McCarthy in most of their head-to-head encounters, his victories were narrow and heavily dependent on black and Hispanic voters. (The alleged coalition between working-class white ethnics and blacks was a Kennedy spinmeister's myth.) He made a poor showing in Oregon, the one predominantly suburban state he ran in, and might well have lost outright to McCarthy in New York, where antiwar sentiment was strong. His support among party bosses, who still controlled the convention, was uncertain and wavering.

The Kennedy brand of charisma, Steel writes, "is not eternal; it must continually be reaffirmed. Although not necessarily destroyed by death, it cannot easily survive defeat." If he had lost the nomination, the implication is, Kennedy faced a drab future as aging presidential pretender, living off the family myth at the distant margins of his party. It is to Sirhan Sirhan's bullet, Steel suggests, that we owe the legend of Bobby Kennedy.

Steel's essay demonstrates the value of the short biographical form. Ignoring the current fashion for swollen tomes that track their subject's every utterance and bodily spasm, he pulls together the major threads of what is known about Robert Kennedy and presents them crisply and gracefully. If the presentation occasionally borders on the hostile, the biases are readily apparent.

But on the central question of charisma, on the why of this unprepossessing figure's power to transport crowds to realms of ecstatic frenzy, Steel sheds no light at all. Bobby had the magic; the legend lives, and the mystery abides. □

Charles R. Morris's *most recent books are* American Catholic *(Times Books, 1997) and* Money, Greed and Risk *(Times Books, 1999).*

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BARBARA & ALEX & ANDREW

A Stairway to Paradise
Madeleine St. John
Carroll & Graf Publishers, $22, 185 pp.

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill

It is a pleasure to return from the trenches of book reviewing with a real find in hand. Indeed, I so enjoyed this slip of a novel that immediately upon finishing it I got hold of Madeleine St. John's earlier work, *The Essence of the Thing* (which was nominated for the Booker Prize), and read it straight through, too.

A Stairway to Paradise begins, appropriately, with Barbara, "big, velvety Barbara," elusive Barbara, alluring Barbara, inspirer of love (or lust) in two middle-aged men. Ambling through her life with no defined plan, she appears to be one of those "nineties dropouts" who inhabit various corners of the British Isles. She drifts into the life of Alex MacLise, a Fleet Street journalist, through her acquaintance with his wife, Claire. Although she initially regards the attractive, dour Alex as a Mr. Rochester type (and in a distracted moment actually asks the housekeeper to iron "Mr. Rochester's" shirts), it is only a matter of days before they find themselves passionately in love. They also find themselves on the horns of a dilemma: Alex feels morally bound to stay in his bloodless marriage until his younger child is old enough to attend boarding school, and Barbara is unwilling to enter into a hidden and adulterous relationship. Anguished but resolute, they part.

Enter Andrew Flynn, a charming and somewhat bumbling academic who has just returned to London after a ten-year sojourn in the United States. His life has taken an unexpected turn: The dream teaching job that has brought him back to London has also cost him his marriage and the company of his beloved young daughter. Meeting Barbara at a party, unaware of her history with his old friend Alex, he immediately falls for her.

Thus the essential geometry of the novel: Alex and Barbara and Andrew in triangle, with tangents out to Alex's wife, Claire, and Andrew's daughter, Mimi, and a phalanx of other very British characters. The interplay of confession and discretion, desire and scruple among these various characters is the essence of the novel. St. John moves along briskly, sometimes skipping a year between chapters, sometimes mere seconds. With her taut writing, she never once fails to convey the emotional intensity of her characters' lives.

Indeed, while the plot is carefully structured and the novel's forty-nine chapters nicely organized into four parts, the writing is so good that it almost doesn't matter what happens. St. John's prose is spare but rich, like a desert flower in bloom. Not a word is wasted. She is a frequent elider, accurately replicating the spoken shorthand that passes for conversation in Britain. Here are Andrew and Alex, sharing a pint after a squash game. Andrew says,

"Mimi comes here quite soon. Summer hols. My turn to parent."

"Ah."

"Strange old world, isn't it?"

"Crazy."

"Yeah. Have another?"

"No thanks, mate. I'm due at the chez about now."

"Right you are. Shall we?"

St. John manages brilliantly to create a narrative voice that is detached, yet directly in touch with vulnerability and pain. "They were both in pretty desperate need of laughter at this juncture, were these two," she writes of Alex and Andrew early in the novel, just after an awkward car ride with Barbara which constitutes the novel's memorable opening scene. Despite the ironic tone, the reader pities these blokes as they grope about in their unspoken suffering. On another occasion, as Alex considers the spaciousness of his north London house, St. John conveys briefly, in architectural terms, the hollowness of his marriage: "The skirting—it made up for a lot, an awful lot, that skirting. It made up for vacancy, and ironical courtesy, and alienation, almost."

A Stairway to Paradise, despite the fact that its protagonists are putatively engaged in an extramarital affair, is a deeply moral novel. It is, ultimately, about human beings searching for God in a puzzling, unpredictable world. Barbara is the novel's most apparent drifter, but in fact Andrew and Alex are both caught in life situations that they could not have imagined or desired. Perhaps what St. John is after is the idea that all of us are drifters, carried along through our lives by a current whose direction and speed we are completely unable to control. The novel's premise is that

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life is, in Alex's words, "an irredeemably irrational construct." Or, as Andrew says, "We're all just stumbling around in the dark. We can't possibly know what we're doing...it's the way we're designed, basically. Not our fault."

The moral question Barbara, Alex, and Andrew all face is how to find meaning in their human helplessness in the face of life's caprices. Alex and Barbara struggle to sort out their love for each other, which is "all wrong, but...the only right, the only possible, thing in all the universe." Barbara argues for moral action as the only choice, though quite possibly a futile one: "'All there is in the end,' she said, 'is—is—simply—trying to keep one's hands clean—and it's difficult.'" Alex counters with a moral doctrine of relatedness, whatever the cost: The best thing we can hope for in life is to connect, really connect, to another soul, he says. He urges Barbara not to reject the possibility of such a heavenly union "for the sake of a mere scruple."

Barbara nails him here. The connection cannot be real, she declares, as long as the scruple exists. All choices in a moral universe are related. To the conundrum of human existence—the longing for love hindered by fate, or compromised by our sinful nature—there is one saving grace, even if it can be summoned only by default. "God may deliver us," Barbara says to Alex, adding, "There's no one else who can help us here."

Much later, in Australia, homesick and still despairingly in love with Alex, Barbara remarks to a friend on the casual use of the phrase, "Oh, God." As she turns it over and over on her lips, it becomes a cry from the heart—a prayer. And in the moment that she utters that prayer, she believes that she finds God. For Barbara, metaphor becomes reality, just as in her relationship with Alex the phrase "with my body I thee worship" was transformed from a dry phrase written by a Tudor clergyman to the ultimate expression of love and connection between two people. The word, indeed, becomes flesh.

There are no tidy endings here. The stairway to paradise does not incline straight up, but dips and shifts, making crazy and unpredicted turns. It reminds this reader of the story of Jacob's ladder. Awaking from a sleep during which he has seen the angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder, and has received God's blessing and promise, Jacob said, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not." In this deftly-written and delightful novel, God lurks just out of sight. □

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill *is co-author with Joseph Papp of* Shakespeare Alive!

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

and/or spouse changed religion in conjunction with marriage. Data on first marriages indicate that about one in two Catholics intermarried, although the rate is lower for older Catholics. For example, only about 30 percent of men and women in their sixties intermarried. If an adjustment is made for the respondent and/or spouse converting to Catholicism at the time of marriage, the intermarriage rate is much lower—about one in three marriages. WILLIAM SANDER

Chicago, Ill.

The writer is professor of economics at DePaul University.

The big picture

I appreciate the concern James Davidson and others have about Catholics marrying outside of the Catholic church [*see* "Outside the Church," September 10, 1999]. A close Jewish friend has a like concern, calling the marriage of Jews to Christians a "loving holocaust." I understand my Jewish friend's concern better than I understand Davidson's.

Our own dear daughter, Hillary, was married to Harry, a fellow from a strong Irish/Italian Catholic heritage. The priest who officiated at the wedding welcomed me equally as a co-celebrant. The ceremony was not a Mass so there were no inhibitors to full participation of all people present from both sides of our two families. The only reservations I could detect came from certain folk from our side who had concern about one of our children marrying a Catholic.

After Catholic young people marry Protestant young people, sometimes they worship in Protestant churches. Sometimes they worship in Catholic churches. Unfortunately, some don't worship at all. For those who worship, the antagonisms evaporate that once made Catholic-Protestant relations less than friendly.

The Catholic church is now in dialogue with the Orthodox churches and with various Protestant denominations because there are essential doctrines they share. Apart from the *filioque*, we believe the same Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. When Protestant or Orthodox young people marry Catholic young people the intra-Christian dialogue is advanced at a fundamental level, helping the cause being discussed at higher levels of church leadership. When young people sense the congruence of the traditions in which they were reared, and

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are determined to rear their own children in the faith "once delivered to the saints," a noteworthy kind of antidote to schism presents itself.

It would seem that I'm arguing for an "it doesn't matter anyway" response to Catholic-Protestant marriages. Instead, I'm arguing "it does matter," but I'm proposing a different "it." It is the Great Fact of the church. Beyond the organizational differences that we have created due to human weakness, there is a visible church. When our youngsters prove to be devoted Christians, worshiping "in spirit and in truth," whether on this mountain or that, something very good is happening.

(REV.) STUART D. ROBERTSON
West Lafayette, Ind.

The writer is pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church.

Back to the facts

Professor James D. Davidson disappoints me [Correspondence, January 28, 2000]. He cites many other studies and clergy impressions to prove I'm wrong about Catholic intermarriage. So what if I seem to be the only one who disagrees! I did not think sociologists argued by counting the number of sociologists who agree with them. Worse still than this *ad hominem* argument, he also does not understand what I said.

I'll try again. I did not say that the proportion of Catholics currently in religious mixed marriages has not increased. Patently it has. I also said that the increase seems to be almost entirely explained by the fact that more of those who are not Catholic and who marry Catholics do not convert, as they formerly did. Let us suppose that a hundred Catholics in a certain parish are to be married this year. Let us also suppose for the purpose of this thought experiment that none of them are engaged to other parishioners. Sixty-five of the Catholics appear at the rectory with a spouse-to-be who was also raised Catholic. Thirty-five appear with a spouse-to-be who was not raised Catholic. I contend that this distribution has not changed in marriage cohorts since the beginning of the century. However, in the present, unlike the past, the future spouses of the thirty-five are much less likely to convert to Catholicism because no one is pushing them to. This seems to me a clear and simple statement of the argument. Professor Davidson apparently does not get it. Or does not want to get it.

Incidentally, the defection rate of Catholics who are not Latinos has been 11 percent in every birth cohort of the century. (REV.) ANDREW GREELEY
Chicago, Ill.

A matter of definition

"The Crisis of Liberal Catholicism" [November 19, 1999] was surely one of the most interesting and thoughtful collection of essays that I have seen in decades of reading *Commonweal*. I wonder, though, if others shared my rather unsettling experience of largely concurring with each of the articles as I read them, even though their authors were, obviously, largely at odds. Am I simply uncomprehending, or might

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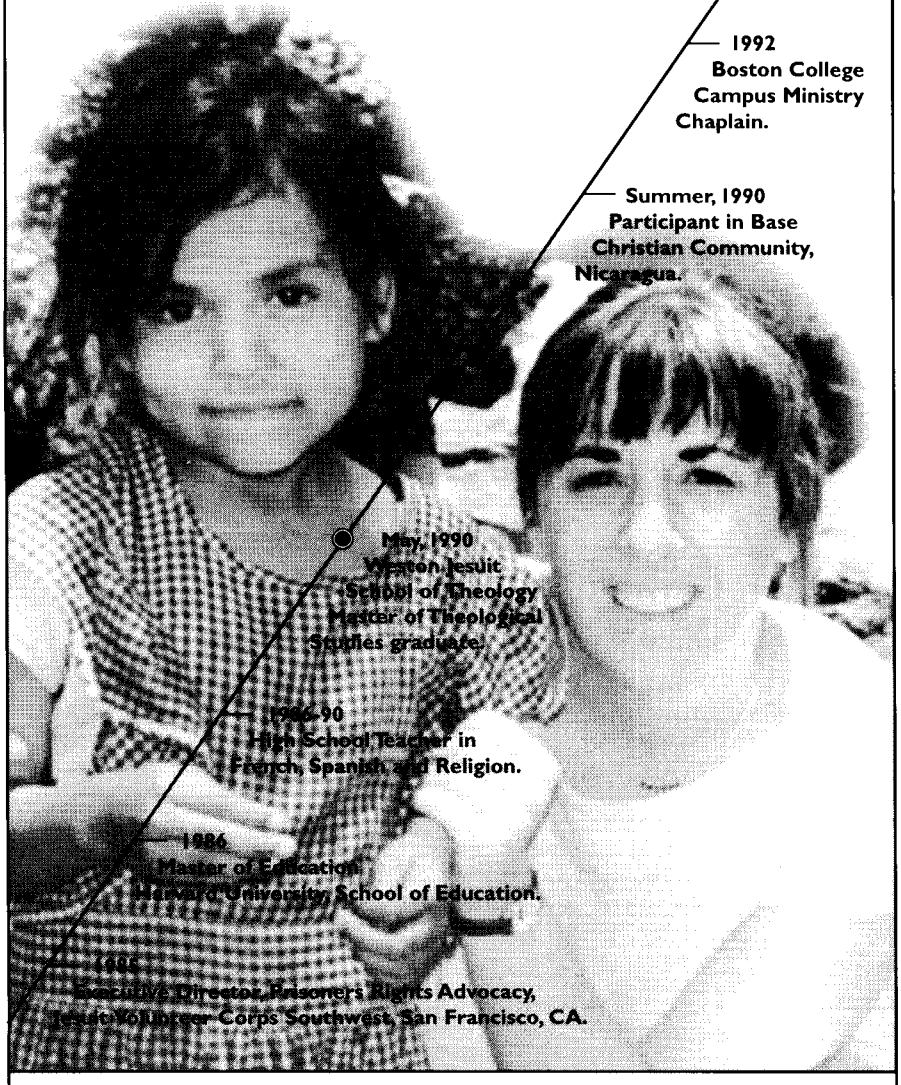

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my puzzlement have had something to do with the threshold question of definition of terms—in particular, the term "liberal." For the most part, each author was careful to define the term, but the definitions pretty clearly differed in material respects. Would the authors' conclusions have been different if each had been obliged to begin with the other's definitions?

I add that for me the only jarring note in Cardinal Francis George's otherwise impressive contribution was his characterization of Vatican II as "a limited accommodation to modernity for the sake of evangelizing the modern world." The tone is one of grudging acceptance rather than enthusiastic embrace and of expedience rather than principle—precisely the vices with which the cardinal appears, in other passages, to charge some liberal activists. Does the cardinal's statement, once again, call for explanation?

WILLIAM H. DEMPSEY
Arlington, Va.

What's left?

I was very disappointed by your issue on Catholic liberalism ["The Crisis of Liberal Catholicism," November 19, 1999]. I have read Mary Jo Weaver's *What's Left?* twice and think it is wonderful. It is very supportive of the people who have continued the ideals of the Catholic Left from the 1960s to the present. Peter Steinfels misconstrued the book in order to defeat the extreme movements and maintain Catholic centrism. It is very disheartening to see that *Commonweal* has become so middle of the road.

CAROL DELLMAN-ANDERSEN
Silver Lake, Ind.

What's happening

Kudos to *Commonweal* and its dedication to delivering insightful and thought-provoking analyses of important issues. I read it regularly at the Princeton University Library where I work in the periodical receipts department. Thousands of periodicals pass through my department each month, so I must be choosy about which I take the time to set aside and read. *Commonweal* is one of those precious few.

Special kudos to Robert G. Hoyt for his article "Israel & Palestine: An Unequal Struggle" [January 14, 2000]. What he saw jives exactly with what I witnessed while living in the Old City as a student in 1989. Where do we begin to know the truth about the Palestinians' plight if not with short but meaningful essays like Mr. Hoyt's?

CHRISTINE DYKGRAAF
Princeton, N.J.

What happened?

How disappointed I've been with *Commonweal* since recently placing a subscription following a long lapse. Instead of the fiery, passionate journal I remember from the 1960s, we're now exposed to some of the dullest, out-of-touch fare imaginable. You used to wax eloquently over gut churning issues like human rights, the Vietnam War, poverty, and public welfare. In the January 14 issue, we read about the Lutheran and Catholic saga and the prospect of gay marriage in Vermont.

After seventy-five years, less charitable readers might well judge *Commonweal* ready for retirement. Your latest tends to support that. I'll continue to pray for a second coming.

PETE KUTSCHERA
Albany, N.Y.

Censored!

Your December 3, 1999 issue "From the Archives" contains a dissenting opinion on *Humanae vitae* by the theologian Gregory Baum. Our parish priest orders several copies of your magazine and one can only openly wonder why a supposedly Catholic magazine presents teaching that, at best, can mislead our Catholic people and, at worst, is the smoke of Satan within our church.

I am formally requesting my pastor and our literature coordinator to discontinue the multiple subscriptions that are paid for by the people of the parish. Obviously, when you decide to be loyal to those you purport to represent, the decision should be reviewed.

EDWARD J. FITZPATRICK
Blauvelt, N.Y.

From the editors: We urge Mr. Fitzpatrick to get his smoke detector checked for faulty wiring.

As for Mr. Kutschera, we are grateful for his prayers.

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Send letter, *curriculum vitae*, and names of references by March 20 to Timothy Kulbicki, O.F.M. Conv., Dean of the School of Theology, Saint Mary's Seminary and University, 5400 Roland Avenue, Baltimore, MD, 21210, or by FAX at 410-433-1384.

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IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

A.W. Godfrey

I am a part-time lobbyist for my union, a teachers' union. For most of us, the term lobbyist sets up an unpleasant image of someone prowling the halls of political power, using underhanded methods, and seeking unfair advantage. During my state's legislative season, I am in the capital, Albany, three or four times a month, asking legislators to restore funding and status to public higher education. It is completely a volunteer job, one, I believe, that is in the public interest.

It is not only the rightness of the cause that makes lobbying so interesting to me, but the theater-of-the-absurd atmosphere that takes place every Tuesday when the legislature is in session. Officially, that is the day legislators see their constituents. Beginning at about 10 A.M., various interest groups converge on the Legislative Office Building (LOB), disgorged from buses, cabs, and private vehicles. Albany's LOB has nine floors to accommodate offices and committee rooms; the wait for an elevator can be long. If you are prudent, early appointments will have been made on the higher floors, later ones lower down. After 10 A.M., every hallway and office is crammed with people and causes. The right-to-life people, often accompanied by clergy, run into the prochoice people with the "sensible shoes"—all with large buttons and appropriate slogans. Veterans' groups, some sporting ill-fitting World War II uniforms, fill legislators' offices to promote their benefits or maintain exemptions. Some years, tenants' groups are in abundance. Always, competing groups for public and private education are looking for increased funding. Their agendas bump against those of the police and firemen's unions, welfare-rights groups, senior citizens, and small-business groups. And then there are the high rollers, representing chambers of commerce, big business, the health-care, banking, and insurance industries. They appear much less strident, and often have appointments with legislators far from the hubbub of the LOB. They sponsor breakfasts, receptions, or dinners at the better clubs and hotels, where they present their agendas in a more genteel atmosphere.

The legislators themselves are a cross section of society—some are sophisticated and urbane, with a good grasp of the issues; others are less polished and not so well prepared. Some are committed to party discipline; others promise to study an issue further, or to support it when it comes to a vote. In general, the senators seem more impressive than members of the Assembly. Since they represent larger constituencies and are not as readily available, the lobbyist is more likely to see an aide who takes copious notes and promises to deliver the message. Your importance can usually be gauged by the seniority of the aide assigned to you or your group.

By 2 P.M., the halls thin out and it becomes possible for staff members to get some legislative work done until about 5 P.M. Then the other side of the legislative process begins—fundraisers and receptions. These take place at various sites within walking distance of the LOB itself. They can be well or thinly attended, depending on the importance or seniority of the host. Generally, fellow legislators amble through to show support and to have a drink or a snack. Often these gatherings are held in dimly lit rooms with portable bars and chafing dishes of chicken fingers, meatballs, cheese cubes, and dip. Majority senators and committee chairs do better: They have choicer venues, and often a sit-down meal. The price for these receptions varies with the influence of the host. Invitees have the option of simply sending money; if they decide not to attend, they are assured of being recognized anyway. Many of the lobbyists I have met are former legislators who lost elections or who "retired" after their pensions were vested. Often they work for lobbying firms, where they serve as the heavy hitters who have instant access and help write legislation that may further the cause of the interests they represent.

The pervasive negative view of lobbyists is partly deserved: Lobbyists often have an inside track on legislators and legislation. But there is another side to the coin: Lobbyists often provide legislators with information and feedback that the lawmakers could not easily obtain from other sources. Sometimes this input is skewed, but rarely is it wrong. Lobbyists, after all, need to stay in business.

Democracy is a complicated process and the playing field is rarely level. Access to legislators is important—and all constituents have it to a limited degree—yet money and the ability to deliver votes are factors that understandably have particular sway with elected officials. It probably ought to be otherwise. Still, the process works, and I am not unhappy that my lobbying over the years has led to personal relationships with various legislators. Many of them are intelligent, principled individuals who chose public service, even though they could have succeeded in any number of other careers.

I would argue that lobbying is not necessarily bad. In fact, a great deal of good comes from raising the consciousness of our elected representatives. □

A.W. Godfrey *lectures in classics and comparative studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.*

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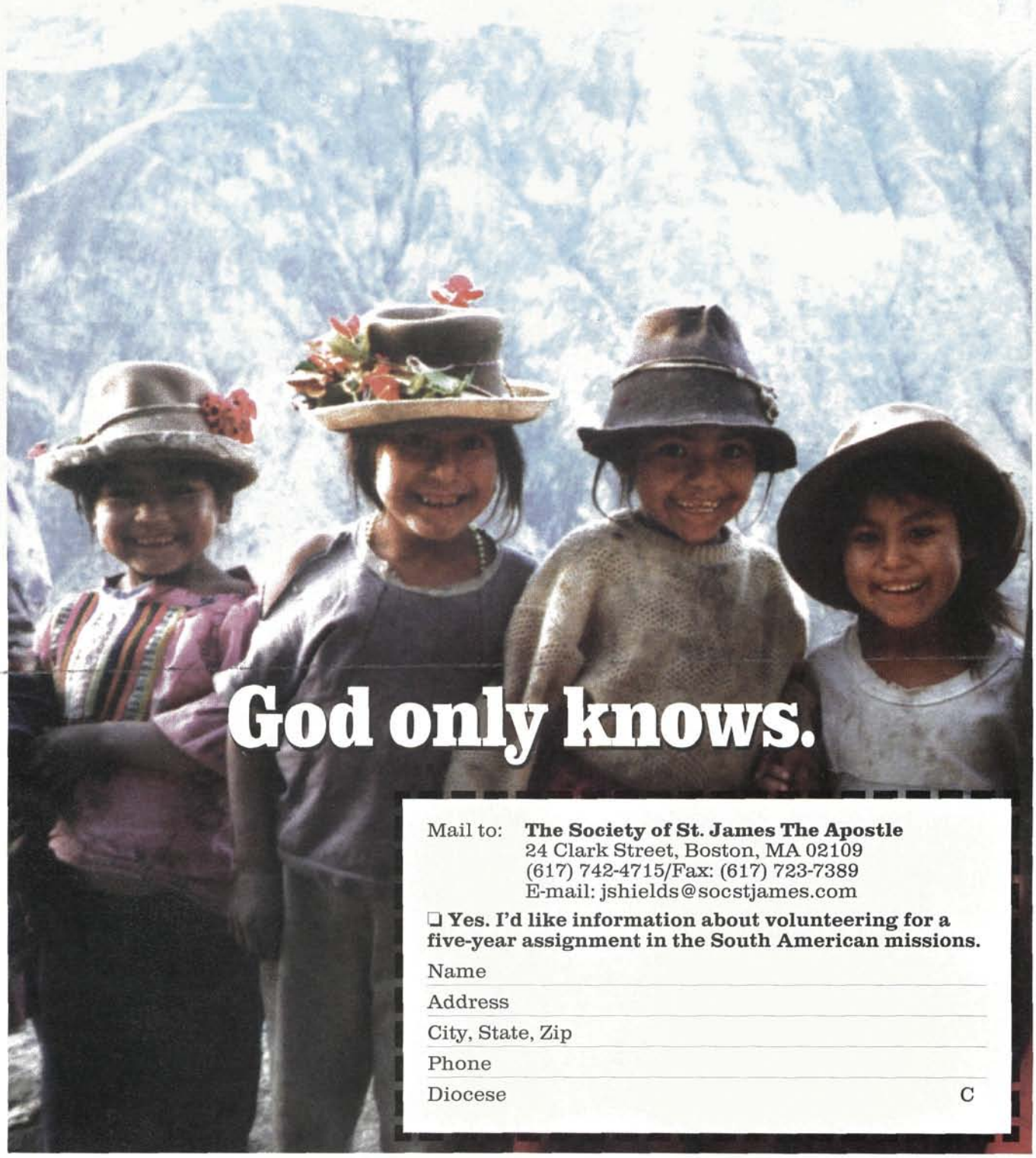

God only knows.

Mail to: **The Society of St. James The Apostle**
24 Clark Street, Boston, MA 02109
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E-mail: jshields@socstjames.com

❑ **Yes. I'd like information about volunteering for a five-year assignment in the South American missions.**

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